

TONY TAKITANI

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Tony Takitani's real name was really that: Tony Takitani.

Because of his name and his curly hair and his deeply sculpted features, he was often assumed to be a mixed-blood child. This was just after the war, when there were lots of children around whose blood was half American G.I. But Tony Takitani's mother and father were both one-hundred-per-cent genuine Japanese. His father, Shozaburo Takitani, had been a fairly successful jazz trombonist, but four years before the Second World War broke out he was forced to leave Tokyo because of a problem involving a woman. If he had to leave town, he figured, he might as well really leave, so he crossed over to China with nothing but his trombone in hand. In those days, Shanghai was just a day's boat ride from Nagasaki. Shozaburo owned nothing in Tokyo - or anywhere else in Japan - that he would hate to lose. He left without regrets. If anything, he suspected, Shanghai, with its well-crafted enticements, would be better suited to his personality than Tokyo was. He was standing on the deck of a boat plowing its way up the Yangtze River the first time he saw Shanghai's elegant avenues glowing in the morning sun, and that did it. The light seemed to promise him a future of tremendous brightness. He was twenty-one years old.

And so he took it easy through the upheaval of the war - from the Japanese invasion of China to the attack on Pearl Harbor to the dropping of two atomic bombs. He played his trombone in Shanghai night clubs as the struggles took place somewhere far away. Shozaburo Takitani was a man who possessed not the slightest inclination to influence - or even to reflect upon - history. He wanted nothing more than to be able to play his trombone, eat three meals a day, and have a few women nearby. He was simultaneously modest and arrogant. Deeply self-centered, he nevertheless treated those around him with kindness and good feeling, which is why most people liked him. Young, handsome, and a talented musician, he stood out wherever he went like a crow on a snowy day. He slept with more women than he could count. Japanese, Chinese, White Russians, whores, married women, gorgeous girls, and girls who were not so gorgeous: he did it with anyone he could get his hands on. Before long, his super-sweet trombone and his super-active giant penis had made him a Shanghai sensation.

Shozaburo was also blessed - though he did not realize it - with a talent for making "useful" friends. He was on good terms with high-ranking Army officers, millionaires, and various influential types who were reaping gigantic

profits from the war through obscure channels. A lot of them carried pistols under their jackets and never exited a building without giving the street a quick scan right and left. For some reason, Shozaburo Takitani and they just "clicked." And they took special care of him whenever problems came up.

But talent can sometimes work against you. When the war ended, Shozaburo's connections won him the attention of the Chinese Army, and he was locked up for a long time. Day after day, others who had been imprisoned for similar reasons were taken out of their cells and executed without a trial. Guards would just appear, drag them into the prison yard, and blow their brains out with automatic pistols. Shozaburo assumed that he would die in prison. But the prospect of death did not frighten him greatly. They would put a bullet through his brain, and it would be all over. A split second of pain. I've lived the way I wanted to all these years, he thought. I've slept with tons of women. I've eaten a lot of good food, and had a lot of good times. There isn't so much in life that I'm sorry I missed. Besides, I'm not in any position to complain about being killed. It's just the way it goes. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese have died in this war, and many of them in far more terrible ways.

As he waited, Shozaburo watched the clouds drift by the bars of his tiny window and painted mental pictures on his cell's filthy walls of the faces and bodies of the women he had slept with. In the end, though, he turned out to be one of only two Japanese prisoners to leave the prison alive and go home to Japan. By that time, the other man, a high-ranking officer, had nearly lost his mind. Shozaburo stood on the deck of the boat, and as he watched the avenues of Shanghai shrinking away in the distance he thought, Life: I'll never understand it.

Emaciated, with no possessions to speak of, Shozaburo Takitani came back to Japan in the spring of 1946, nine months after the war had ended. He discovered that his parents' house had burned down in the great Tokyo air raid of March, 1945, and they were dead. His only brother had disappeared without a trace on the Burmese front. In other words, Shozaburo was now alone in the world. This was not a great shock to him, however; nor did it make him feel particularly sad. He did, of course, experience some sense of absence, but he was convinced that everyone ended up alone sooner or later. He was in his thirties, and beyond the age for complaining about loneliness. He felt as if he had suddenly aged several years at once. But that was all. No further emotion welled up inside him.

One way or another, Shozaburo had managed to survive, and he would have to start thinking of ways to go on living.

Because he knew only one line of work, he hunted up some of his old buddies and put together a little jazz band that started playing at the American military bases. His talent for making contacts won him the friendship of a jazz-loving American Army major, an Italian-American from New Jersey who

played a mean clarinet himself. The two of them often jammed together in their spare time. An officer in the Quartermaster Corps, the major could get all the records he wanted, straight from the United States, and Shozaburo would go to the major's quarters and listen to the happy jazz of Bobby Hackett, Jack Teagarden, and Benny Goodman, teaching himself as many of their licks as he could. The major supplied him with all kinds of food and milk and liquor, which were difficult to get a hold of in those days. Not bad, Shozaburo thought, not a bad time to be alive.

In 1947, he married a distant cousin on his mother's side. They happened to run into each other one day on the street and, over tea, shared news of their relatives and talked about the old days. Before long they ended up living together - probably because she had become pregnant. At least, that was the way that Tony Takitani heard it from his father. His mother was a pretty girl, and quiet, but not very healthy. She gave birth to Tony the year after she was married, and three days later she died. Just like that. And just like that she was cremated, quickly and quietly. She had experienced no great complications and no suffering to speak of. She just faded into nothingness, as if someone had gone backstage and flicked a switch.

Shozaburo Takitani had no idea how he was supposed to feel about this. He was a stranger to such emotions. He could not seem to grasp with any precision what death was all about, nor could he come to any conclusion regarding what this particular death meant for him. All he could do was swallow it whole, as a fait accompli. And so he came to feel that some kind of flat, disk like thing had lodged itself in his chest. What it was, or why it was there, he couldn't say. The object simply stayed in place and blocked him from thinking any more about what had happened. He thought about nothing at all for a full week after his wife died. He even forgot about the baby that he had left in the hospital.

The major took Shozaburo under his wing and did all he could to console him. They drank together at the base nearly every day. "You've got to get a hold of yourself," the major would tell Shozaburo. "The one thing you absolutely have to do is bring that boy up right." The words meant nothing to Shozaburo, who merely nodded in silence. "Hey, I know," the major added suddenly one day. "Why don't you let me be the boy's godfather? I'll give him a name." Oh, Shozaburo thought, he had forgotten to give the baby a name.

The major suggested his own first name - Tony. Tony was no name for a Japanese child, of course, but such a thought never crossed the major's mind. When Shozaburo got home, he wrote the name Tony Takitani on a piece of paper and stuck it to the wall. He stared at it for the next several days. Tony Takitani. Not bad. Not bad. The American occupation of Japan was probably going to last awhile, he thought, and an American-style name just might come in handy for the kid at some point.

For the child himself, though, living with a name like that was not much fun. The other kids at school called him a "half-breed," and whenever he told people his name they responded with a look of puzzlement or distaste. Some people thought it was a bad joke, and others reacted with anger. For certain people, coming face to face with a child called Tony Takitani was all it took to reopen old wounds.

Such experiences served only to close the boy off from the world. He never made any close friends, but this did not cause him pain. He found it natural to be by himself: it was a kind of premise for living. His father was always traveling with the band, and when Tony was little a housekeeper had come to take care of him during the day. But by the time he was in his last years at elementary school, he could manage without her. He cooked for himself, locked up at night, and slept alone. This seemed preferable to having someone fussing over him all the time.

Shozaburo Takitani never married again. He had plenty of girlfriends, of course, but he didn't bring any of them to the house. Like his son, he was used to taking care of himself. Father and son were not as different from each other as one might imagine. But, being the kind of people they were, imbued to an equal degree with a habitual solitude, neither took the initiative to open his heart to the other. Neither felt a need to do so. Shozaburo Takitani was not well suited to being a father, and Tony Takitani was not well suited to being a son.

Tony Takitani loved to draw, and he spent hours every day shut up in his room, doing just that. He especially loved to draw pictures of machines. Keeping his pencil needle-sharp, he would produce clear, accurate, and highly detailed drawings of bicycles, radios, engines, and the like. If he drew a plant, he would capture every vein in every leaf. It was the only way he knew how to draw. His grades in art, unlike those in other subjects, were always outstanding, and he usually won first prize in school art contests.

So it was perfectly natural for Tony Takitani to go from high school to art school to a career as an illustrator. There was never any need for him to consider other possibilities. While the young people around him were agonizing over the paths they should follow in life, he went on doing his mechanical drawings without a thought for anything else. And, because it was a time when most young people were acting out against the establishment with passion and violence, none of his contemporaries saw anything of value in his utilitarian art. His art-school professors viewed his work with twisted smiles. His classmates criticized it as lacking in ideological content. Tony himself could not see what was so great about their work, with its ideological content. To him it looked immature, ugly, and inaccurate.

Once he graduated from college, though, everything changed for him. Thanks to the extreme practicality of his realistic technique, Tony Takitani never had a problem finding work. No one could match the precision with

which he drew complicated machines and architecture. "They look realer than the real thing," everyone said. His sketches were more detailed than photographs, and they had a clarity that made any explanation a waste of words. All of a sudden, he was the one illustrator everybody had to have. And he took on everything - from the covers of automobile magazines to advertising illustrations. He enjoyed the work, and he made good money. Without any hobbies to drain his resources, he managed by the time he was thirty-five to amass a small fortune. He bought a big house in Setagaya, an affluent Tokyo suburb, and he owned several apartments that brought him rental income. His accountant took care of all the details.

By this point in his life, Tony had been involved with several different women. He had even lived with one of them, for a short time. But he had never considered marriage, had never seen a need for it. Cooking, cleaning, and laundry he could manage for himself, and when his work interfered with those things he hired a housekeeper. He never felt a desire to have children. He lacked his father's special charm, and he had no real friends of the kind who would come to him for advice or to confess secrets, not even one to drink with. But he had perfectly normal relationships with people he saw on a daily basis. There was nothing arrogant or boastful about him. He never made excuses for himself or spoke slightly of others, and just about everybody who knew him liked him. He saw his father no more than once every two or three years, on some matter of business. When the business was over, neither man had much to say to the other. Thus, Tony Takitani's life went by, quietly and calmly.

Then one day, without the slightest warning, Tony Takitani fell in love. She worked part time for a publishing company, and she came to his office to pick up an illustration. Twenty-two years old, she was a demure girl with a gentle smile. Her features were pleasant enough but, objectively speaking, she was no great beauty. Still, there was something about her that gave Tony Takitani's heart a violent punch. The moment he first saw her, his chest tightened, and he could hardly breathe. Not even he could say what it was about her that had struck him with such force.

The next thing that caught his attention was her clothes. He generally took no particular interest in what people wore, but there was something so wonderful about the way this girl dressed that it made a deep impression on him; indeed, one could even say it moved him. There were plenty of women around who dressed elegantly, and plenty more who dressed to impress, but this girl was different. Utterly different. She wore her clothes with such naturalness and grace that she could have been a bird that had enveloped itself in a special wind as it prepared to fly off to another world. He had never seen a woman wear her clothes with such apparent joy.

After she left, he sat at his desk, dazed, doing nothing until evening came and the room turned completely dark.

The next day, he phoned the publisher and found some pretext to have her come to his office again. When their business was finished, he invited her to lunch. They made small talk as they ate. Though they were fifteen years apart in age, they found they had much in common, almost strangely so. They agreed on every topic. He had never had such an experience before, and neither had she. She was a little nervous at first, but she gradually relaxed, until she was laughing and talking freely.

"You really know how to dress," Tony said when they parted.

"I like clothes," she answered, with a bashful smile. "Most of my money goes on clothing."

They went on a few dates after that. They didn't go anywhere in particular, just found quiet places to sit and talk for hours - about their pasts, about their work, about the way they thought or felt about this or that. They never seemed to tire of talking. It was as if they were filling up each other's emptiness.

The fifth time they met, he asked her to marry him. But she had a boyfriend she had been seeing since high school. The relationship had become less than ideal with the passage of time, she admitted, and now they seemed to fight about the stupidest things whenever they met. In fact, seeing him was nowhere near as free and fun as seeing Tony Takitani, but, still, that didn't mean that she could simply break it off. She had her reasons, whatever they were. And, besides, there was that fifteen-year difference in age. She was still young and inexperienced. She wondered what that age gap might mean to them in the future. She said she wanted time to think.

Each day that she spent thinking was another day in hell for Tony Takitani. He couldn't work. He drank, alone. Suddenly, his solitude became a crushing weight, a source of agony, a prison. I just never noticed it before, he thought. With despairing eyes, he stared at the thick, cold walls surrounding him and thought, if she says she doesn't want to marry me, I might just kill myself.

He went to see her and told her exactly how he felt. How lonely his life had been until then. How much he had lost over the years. How she had made him realize all that.

She was an intelligent young woman. She had come to like this Tony Takitani. She had thought well of him from the start, and each meeting had only made her like him more. Whether she could call this "love" she didn't know. But she felt that he had something wonderful inside, and that she would be happy if she made her life with him. And so they married.

By marrying her, Tony Takitani brought the lonely period of his life to an end. When he awoke in the morning, the first thing he did was look for her. When

he found her sleeping next to him, he felt relief. When she wasn't there, he felt anxious and searched the house for her. There was something odd for him about not feeling lonely. The very fact that he had ceased to be lonely caused him to fear the possibility of becoming lonely again. The question haunted him: What would he do? Sometimes this fear would make him break out in a cold sweat. As he became used to his new life, though, and the possibility of his wife's suddenly disappearing seemed to lessen, the anxiety gradually eased. In the end, he settled down and wrapped himself in his new and peaceful happiness.

One day, she said that she wanted to hear what kind of music her father-in-law was making. "Do you think he would mind if we went to hear him?" she asked.

"Probably not," Tony said.

They went to a Ginza night club where Shozaburo Takitani was performing. This was the first time that Tony Takitani had gone to hear his father play since childhood. Shozaburo was playing exactly the same music he had played in the old days, the same songs that Tony had heard so often on records when he was a boy. Shozaburo's style was smooth, elegant, sweet. It was not art, but it was music made by the skillful hand of a professional, and it could put a crowd in a good mood.

Soon, however, something began to constrict Tony Takitani's breathing, as though he were a narrow pipe that was filling quietly, but inexorably, with sludge, and he found it difficult to remain seated. He couldn't help feeling that the music he was hearing now was just slightly different from the music he remembered his father playing. He had heard it years ago, of course, and he had been listening with a child's ears, after all, but the difference, it seemed to him, was terribly important. It was infinitesimal but crucial. He wanted to go up onto the stage, take his father by the arm, and ask, "What is it, Father? What has changed?" But he did nothing of the sort. He would never have been able to explain what was in his mind. Instead, he stayed at his table until the end of his father's set, drinking much more than he usually did. When it was over, he and his wife applauded and went home.

The couple's married life was free of shadows. They never fought, and they spent many happy hours together, taking walks, going to movies, traveling. Tony Takitani's work continued as successfully as ever, and, for someone so young, his wife was remarkably capable at running their home. There was, however, one thing that did concern him somewhat, and that was her tendency to buy too many clothes. Confronted with a piece of clothing, she seemed incapable of restraint. A strange look would come over her, and even her voice would change. The first time he saw this happen, Tony Takitani thought that she had suddenly taken ill. He had noticed it before their marriage, but it wasn't until their honeymoon that it began to seem serious. She bought a shocking number of items during their travels around Europe.

In Milan and Paris, she went from boutique to boutique, morning to night, like one possessed. They did no sightseeing at all. Instead of the Duomo or the Louvre, they saw Valentino, Missoni, Saint Laurent, Givenchy, Ferragamo, Armani, Cerutti, Gianfranco Ferré. Mesmerized, she swept up everything she could get her hands on, and he followed behind her, paying the bills. He almost worried that the raised digits on his credit card might wear down.

Her fever did not abate after they returned to Japan. She continued to buy new clothes nearly every day. The number of articles of clothing in her possession skyrocketed. To store them, Tony had several large armoires custom made. He also had a cabinet built for her shoes. Even so, there was not enough space for everything. In the end, he had an entire room redesigned as a walk-in closet. They had rooms to spare in their large house, and money was not a problem. Besides, she did such a marvelous job of wearing what she bought, and she looked so happy whenever she had new clothes, that Tony decided not to complain. Nobody's perfect, he told himself.

When the volume of her clothing became too great to fit into the special room, however, even Tony Takitani began to have some misgivings. Once, when she was out, he counted her dresses. He calculated that she could change outfits twice a day and still not repeat herself for almost two years. She was so busy buying them that she had no time to wear them. He wondered if she might have a psychological problem. If so, he might need to apply the brakes to her habit at some point.

He took the plunge one night after dinner. "I wish you would consider cutting back a little on the way you buy clothes," he said. "It's not a question of money. I'm not talking about that. I have no objection to your buying what you need, and it makes me happy to see you looking so pretty, but do you really need so many expensive dresses?"

His wife lowered her gaze and thought about this for a time. Then she looked at him and said, "You're right, of course. I don't need so many dresses. I know that. But, even though I know it, I can't help myself. When I see a beautiful dress, I have to buy it. Whether I need it, or whether I have too many, is beside the point. I just can't stop myself." She promised to try to hold back. "If I keep on going this way, the whole house is going to fill up with my clothes before too long."

And so she locked herself inside for a week, and managed to stay away from clothing stores. This was a time of great suffering for her. She felt as if she were walking on the surface of a planet with little air. She spent every day in her room full of clothing, taking down one piece after another to gaze at it. She would caress the material, inhale its fragrance, slip the clothes on, and look at herself in the mirror. But the more she looked the more she wanted something new. The desire for new clothing became unbearable. She simply couldn't stand it.

She did, however, love her husband deeply. And she respected him. She knew that he was right. She called one of her favorite boutiques and asked the proprietor if she might be allowed to return a coat and dress that she had bought ten days earlier but had never worn. "Certainly, Madam," she was told. She was one of the store's best customers; they could do that much for her. She put the coat and dress in her blue Renault Cinque and drove to the fashionable Aoyama district. There she returned the clothes and received a credit. She hurried back to her car, trying not to look at anything else, then drove straight home. She had a certain feeling of lightness at having returned the clothes. Yes, she told herself, it was true: I did not need those things. I have enough coats and dresses to last the rest of my life. But, as she waited for a red light to change, the coat and dress were all she could think about. Colors, cut, and texture: she remembered them in vivid detail. She could picture them as clearly as if they were in front of her. A film of sweat broke out on her forehead. With her forearms pressed against the steering wheel, she drew in a long, deep breath and closed her eyes. At the very moment that she opened them again, she saw the light change to green. Instinctively, she stepped down on the accelerator.

A large truck that was trying to make it across the intersection on a yellow light slammed into the side of her Renault at full speed. She never felt a thing.

Tony Takitani was left with a roomful of size-2 dresses and a hundred and twelve pairs of shoes. He had no idea what to do with them. He was not going to keep all his wife's clothes for the rest of his life, so he called a dealer and agreed to sell the hats and accessories for the first price the man offered. Stockings and underthings he bunched together and burned in the garden incinerator. There were simply too many dresses and shoes to deal with, so he left them where they were. After the funeral, he shut himself in the walk-in closet, and spent the day staring at the rows of clothes.

Ten days later, Tony Takitani put an ad in the newspaper for a female assistant, dress size 2, height approximately five feet three, shoe size 6, good pay, favorable working conditions. Because the salary he quoted was abnormally high, thirteen women showed up at his studio in Minami-Aoyama to be interviewed. Five of them were obviously lying about their dress size. From the remaining eight, he chose the one whose build was closest to his wife's, a woman in her mid-twenties with an unremarkable face. She wore a plain white blouse and a tight blue skirt. Her clothes and shoes were neat and clean but worn.

Tony Takitani told the woman, "The work itself is not very difficult. You just come to the office every day from nine to five, answer the telephone, deliver illustrations, pick up materials for me, make copies - that sort of thing. There is only one condition attached. I've recently lost my wife, and I have a huge amount of her clothing at home. Most of what she left is new or almost new.

I would like you to wear her things as a kind of uniform while you work here. I know this must sound strange to you but, believe me, I have no ulterior motive. It's just to give me time to get used to the idea that my wife is gone. If you are nearby wearing her clothing, I'm pretty sure, it will finally come home to me that she is dead."

Biting her lip, the young woman considered the proposal. It was, as he said, a strange request - so strange, in fact, that she could not fully comprehend it. She understood the part about his wife's having died. And she understood the part about the wife's having left behind a lot of clothing. But she could not quite grasp why she should have to work in the wife's clothes. Normally, she would have had to assume that there was more to it than met the eye. But, she thought, this man did not seem to be a bad person. You had only to listen to the way he talked to know that. Maybe the loss of his wife had done something to his mind, but he didn't look like the type of man who would let that kind of thing cause him to harm another person. And, in any case, she needed work. She had been looking for a job for a very long time, her unemployment insurance was about to run out, and she would probably never find a job that paid as well as this one did.

"I think I understand," she said. "And I think I can do what you are asking me to do. But, first, I wonder if you can show me the clothes I will have to wear. I had better check to see if they really are my size."

"Of course," Tony Takitani said, and he took the woman to his house and showed her the room. She had never seen so many dresses gathered together in a single place except in a department store. Each dress was obviously expensive and of high quality. The taste, too, was flawless. The sight was almost blinding. The woman could hardly catch her breath. Her heart started pounding. It felt like sexual arousal, she realized.

Tony Takitani left the woman alone in the room. She pulled herself together and tried on a few of the dresses. She tried on some shoes as well. Everything fit as though it had been made for her. She looked at one dress after another. She ran her fingertips over the material and breathed in the fragrance. Hundreds of beautiful dresses were hanging there in rows. Before long, tears welled up in her eyes and began to pour out of her. There was no way she could hold them back. Her body swathed in a dress of the woman who had died, she stood utterly still, sobbing, struggling to keep the sound from escaping her throat. Soon Tony Takitani came to see how she was doing.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "I've never seen so many beautiful dresses before. I think it must have upset me. I'm sorry." She dried her tears with a handkerchief.

"If it's all right with you, I'd like to have you start at the office tomorrow," Tony said in a businesslike manner. "Pick out a week's worth of dresses and shoes and take them home with you."

The woman devoted a lot of time to choosing six days' worth of dresses. Then she chose shoes to match. She packed everything into a suitcase.

"Take a coat, too," Tony Takitani said. "You don't want to be cold."

She chose a warm-looking gray cashmere coat. It was so light that it could have been made of feathers. She had never held such a lightweight coat in her life.

When the woman was gone, Tony Takitani went back into his wife's closet, shut the door, and let his eyes wander vacantly over her dresses. He could not understand why the woman had cried when she saw them. To him, they looked like shadows that his wife had left behind. Size-2 shadows of his wife hung there in long rows, layer upon layer, as if someone had gathered and hung up samples of the infinite possibilities (or at least the theoretically infinite possibilities) implied in the existence of a human being.

These dresses had once clung to his wife's body, which had endowed them with the warm breath of life and made them move. Now, however, what hung before him were mere scruffy shadows, cut off from the roots of life and steadily withering away, devoid of any meaning whatsoever. Their rich colors danced in space like pollen rising from flowers, lodging in his eyes and ears and nostrils. The frills and buttons and lace and epaulets and pockets and belts sucked greedily at the room's air, thinning it out until he could hardly breathe. Liberal numbers of mothballs gave off a smell that might as well have been the sound of a million tiny winged insects. He hated these dresses now, it suddenly occurred to him. Slumping against the wall, he folded his arms and closed his eyes. Loneliness seeped into him once again, like a lukewarm broth. It's all over now, he told himself. No matter what I do, it's over.

He called the woman and told her to forget about the job. There was no longer any work for her to do, he said, apologizing.

"But how can that be?" the woman asked, stunned.

"I'm sorry, but the situation has changed," he said. "You can have the clothes and shoes you took home, and the suitcase, too. I just want you to forget that this ever happened, and please don't tell anyone about it."

The woman could make nothing of this, and the more she pressed for answers the more pointless it seemed.

"I see," she said finally, and hung up.

For a few minutes, she felt angry at Tony Takitani. But soon she came to feel that things had probably worked out for the best. The whole business had been peculiar from the beginning. She was sorry to have lost the job but she figured she would manage somehow or other.

She unpacked the dresses she had brought home from Tony Takitani's house, smoothed them out, and hung them in her wardrobe. The shoes she put into the shoe cabinet by her front door. Compared with these new arrivals, her own clothes and shoes looked horrendously shabby. She felt as if they were a completely different type of matter, fashioned of materials from another dimension. She took off the blouse and skirt she had worn to the interview, hung them up, and changed into jeans and a sweatshirt. Then she sat on the floor, drinking a cold beer. Recalling the room full of clothes she had seen at Tony Takitani's house, she heaved a sigh. So many beautiful dresses, she thought. And that "closet": it was bigger than my whole apartment. Imagine the time and money that must have gone into buying all those clothes! And now the woman who did it is dead. I wonder what it must feel like to die and leave so many beautiful dresses behind.

The woman's friends were well aware that she was poor, so they were amazed to see her wearing a new dress every time they got together - each one a sophisticated, expensive brand.

"Where did you ever get a dress like that?" they would ask her.

"I promised not to tell," she would say, shaking her head. "Besides, even if I told you, you wouldn't believe me."

In the end, Tony Takitani had another used-clothing dealer take away everything that his wife had left behind. The dealer gave Tony less than a twentieth of what he had paid for the clothes, but that didn't matter to him. He would have let them go for nothing, so long as they were going to a place where he would never see them again.

Once in a while, Tony would go to the empty room and stay there for an hour or two, doing nothing in particular, just letting his mind go blank. He would sit on the floor and stare at the bare walls, at the shadows of his dead wife's shadows. But, as the months went by, he lost the ability to recall the things that had been in the room. The memory of their colors and smells faded away almost before he knew it was gone. Even the vivid emotions he had once cherished fell back, as if retreating from the province of his mind. Like a mist in the breeze, his memories changed shape, and with each change they grew fainter. Each memory was now the shadow of a shadow of a shadow. The only thing that remained tangible to him was the sense of absence.

Sometimes he could barely recall his wife's face. What he did recall, though, was the woman, a total stranger, shedding tears in the room at the sight of

the dresses that his wife had left behind. He recalled her unremarkable face and her worn-out patent-leather shoes. Long after he had forgotten all kinds of things, including the woman's name, her image remained strangely unforgettable.

Two years after Tony Takitani's wife died, his father died of liver cancer. Shozaburo Takitani suffered little, and his time in the hospital was short. He died almost as if falling asleep. In that sense, he lived a charmed life to the end. Aside from a little cash and some stock certificates, Shozaburo left nothing that could be called property. There was only his instrument, and a gigantic collection of old jazz records. Tony Takitani left the records in the boxes supplied by the moving company and stacked them up on the floor of the empty room. Because they smelled of mold, he had to open the windows in the room at regular intervals to air it out. Otherwise, he never set foot in the place.

A year went by this way, but having the boxes of records in the house began to bother him more and more. Often, the mere thought of them sitting in there made him feel that he was suffocating. Sometimes, too, he would wake in the middle of the night and be unable to get back to sleep. His memories had grown indistinct, but they were still there, where they had always been, with all the weight that memories can have.

Tony Takitani called a record dealer and had him make an offer for the collection. Because it contained many valuable disks that were long out of print, he received a remarkably high payment - enough to buy a small car. To him, however, the money meant nothing.

Once the records had disappeared from his house, Tony Takitani was really alone.

Translated, from the Japanese, by Jay Rubin.