

The Bamboo Girl

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An extract

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You were on the moon. Because that was where
you lived – the moon.

See, you got a big bowl of honey cakes out of the cupboard
and poured yourself a big glass of blue lemonade.
Then you went to the telescope room.
You sat down.

You turned the ring to focus the telescope.
You looked at the earth and saw foaming waterfalls.
You saw a beautiful purple storm over a tiny trembling island.
You saw a volcano that was about to poke out its orange tongue.

But today you weren't searching for things like that. You didn't care
about water and fire and earth and air today.
Because you were alone.
And you were feeling cold.
So you took a big honey cake and searched for that one special place.

Look, there it is.
Oi.

You sat on your chair on the moon
and watched what was happening
in Oi.

Oi was a little patch of land in Japan where good people lived.
A lot of them were ordinary people, and very friendly, but you also
had a long line of princes and a very, very old emperor.

In a little house in the third lane on the right,
the bamboo cutter woke up.
It was early in the morning.
He'd slept for four and a half hours, his head
heavy on the pillow.
Now he got up and stretched, and while he was stretching,
he didn't have quite as many wrinkles.

The bamboo cutter wasn't a young man anymore. And his wife, the dressmaker, had lived and worked for a good long time too. They had watched each other grow old, but they didn't mind. Sometimes they joked about who had the most wrinkles. "Me," the bamboo cutter said.

"No, me," said the dressmaker.
"Ah," the bamboo cutter smiled, "too bad we don't have children. They could count them for us."
"That's not funny," the dressmaker said.
"No," the bamboo cutter said. "You're right. It's not." Because they didn't have any children. And their jokes were a way to keep from feeling sad about it.

The bamboo cutter set to work.
He grew the greenest bamboo. The stalks were strong, but when you held them in your hands they seemed to want to keep growing. Like living bamboo canes. Today he had a big order, so he held out his knife and bent his old back low to the ground.

"Yee," the ground said. No, it was the bamboo. Huh, what's that? thought the bamboo cutter. Talking bamboo! Impossible. I'm hearing things, he thought.

"Yee," he heard again.
The bamboo cutter got down on his knees, peered at the spot in the earth where a new shoot was just coming up, and thought, Now I'm seeing things.

Because he saw a girl.
"Yee," she said.
She was only four inches tall.
She was wearing a lovely blue robe and she had dark blue shoes on her little feet. Everything about her was real and it was all tiny.

She brought tears to the bamboo cutter's eyes, and when he cradled her in his hands to take her to his wife, those tears ran down his cheeks.

"Yee," the little girl sighed, and when she saw their child the dressmaker said "Yee" too. Because here she was. At last. Their child.

As old as the girl's parents were, they felt themselves getting younger with every inch Yee grew.

Yee, yes, that's what they called her.

The dressmaker and the bamboo cutter had no idea what they'd done to deserve so much joy – a child that played like a kingfisher and giggled with the sound of fluttering butterfly wings.

"She's been given to us as a gift," the dressmaker said.
"She's been entrusted to us," said the bamboo cutter.

If they asked her where she came from, the little girl never answered. Instead she leapt into their arms and said, "Time for a tickle!"

With her father, Yee looked after the bamboo shoots. With her mother, she worked on new dresses. She herself always wore blue. Even when she'd turned ten. Even when she'd turned fourteen.

By the time she was eighteen, Yee was such a beautiful young woman that none of the men in the village – none of them – could think of any girl but her. Her royal blue dress was gorgeous, but her face was so noble, her eyes were so bright and she shone so much that people hardly noticed what she was wearing. When she went by, the men just stood there with their mouths hanging open.

And they didn't call her Yee.
They called her The Radiant Princess
from the Supple Bamboo:
[Nayotake no Kaguya-hime](#).

Nayotake no Kaguya-hime, who was really just called Yee, liked to spend most of her time indoors. She loved to watch her mother's old hands drawing very precise lines on the pattern paper with a freshly sharpened pencil. The paper was thin, but it never tore.

Nayotake no Kaguya-hime, real name Yee, did go out sometimes, but mainly into her own garden, where she watched her father's old hands stroking the bamboo stalks – yes, he stroked them, because you had to do that, he said, before using your sharpest knife to cut them off at the root.

She slept a lot too. And while Nayotake no Kaguya-hime was asleep, her father and mother sat together with their hands resting on the wooden table.

"We're still alive," the dressmaker said.
"But not for much longer," the bamboo cutter said.
"If we die, she'll be all alone," the dressmaker said.
"We can't leave her alone," the bamboo cutter said.

“We have to make sure she gets married,” said the dressmaker.
“She doesn’t want to,” said the bamboo cutter.
“If you talk to her, she will,” said the dressmaker.
“You have to talk to her.”
The bamboo cutter nodded.

The next day he spoke to Nayotake
no Kaguya-hime.
After he’d finished, she lowered her head.

She answered, “There’s no need. You’ll both live for ages yet.
I’m staying here. That’s how it’s meant to be.”
“Well, no,” the bamboo cutter said, scratching his head.

“Maybe...” Yee said, wavering.
“Maybe if I give them a task. To see who’s best...
If they succeed. Maybe then...”
The bamboo cutter screwed up his eyes – something
he only did when he was feeling very, very happy.
“That’s it. Whoever wants to marry you has to go to the furthest
horizon. To get something you’ve requested. If they go to the
furthest horizon and come back – we’ll know they’re special.
Do you understand?”
“I understand,” said Nayotake no Kaguya-hime.
And the sparkle in her eyes was just like the sparkle in her father’s.

*What? you thought on the moon.
I’m glad they understand, but I don’t get it! What’s she doing?
That’s no way to find a nice prince. Or did I miss something?
Is this a fairy tale or not?*

*You stood up and left the
telescope to watch on its own.
You thought, I’ll have
another honey cake.*

It was decided. Whoever wanted to marry
Nayotake no Kaguya-hime had to fulfil
a task first. And look, here comes
her first admirer.

It was a prince. He was wearing a ring
with a stone so bright the sun had to
do its best not to fall in love with it.

The prince introduced himself. “Ishitsukuri
is the name, O, Lady, who wears blue as if
the oceans themselves have dyed her fabric,
I seek your hand. Where is your hand?
May I have your hand?”

In the kitchen, Yee’s mother couldn’t help but chuckle
and the corners of Nayotake no Kaguya-hime’s mouth
lifted too. But in a dignified and friendly voice
she said, “Prince Ishi, I will find my hand and make

it yours if you first fulfil the task I set you.”

Prince Ishi bowed, ready to do anything at all for her.
Nayotake no Kaguya-hime, usually called Yee, spoke:

“Bring me Buddha’s begging bowl.
The holy Buddha’s own bowl.
Buddha, who lives in India.
His begging bowl.
Not a bowl from the monk next to him
or the monk behind him –
Buddha’s begging bowl.
Bring me that bowl and I will be your wife,
with both my hands. And the rest.”

No one knows what Ishi thought of this task,
but a little later the old bamboo cutter came home
just as the prince and his emissaries were leaving.
Their kept their heads bowed well past the gate.

One and a half years later the entire company returned,
and again the prince and his retinue kept their heads bowed
as they approached Nayotake no Kaguya-hime.
“My lady,” the prince said.
He handed Yee an expensive silk bag embroidered with gold thread.
“For you.”

Yee was too shy to speak. For the first few months she’d
worried about this moment. Later, at times, she’d almost
forgotten it. But now the moment had come, now she—
But when she opened the bag, the room stayed dim.

Something was wrong. Buddha’s real begging bowl would have
made everything around it shine, it would have turned their little
house into a festival of light. It was a heavenly bowl with
heavenly rays.
This was just an old bowl.
A bowl that, even if it were polished, would never glow from within.
It was a begging bowl the prince had stolen from an ordinary temple
somewhere in the mountains. *India?* Of course he hadn’t gone
all the way to India.

Yee, who was actually called
Nayotake no Kaguya-hime, studied the bowl.
She gave it to her mother.
The old dressmaker studied the bowl.
She gave it back to her daughter.
Yee slid it over the floor to the prince, who was
bowed down with his nose in the carpet,
and she said:
“No, this isn’t Buddha’s begging bowl.
You spent one and a half years to present me with
an outright lie. Was the furthest horizon too far?
No. That’s my answer. No, no, no.”

She had only just said this when the old
bamboo cutter appeared beside her.
“Prince Ishitsukuri,” he said to the
dumbstruck prince, “shall I show you

to the door or can you find your own way out?"

The prince and his retinue found their own way out.

Between the clouds the sun watched them go,
shook its head and mumbled, "Too bad
about that ring. Just gorgeous."

**A-ha! you thought up there on the moon.
Now I get it. I see what she's up to!**

The next admirer was a prince as well. He had a nose
that was so straight the entire mountain range behind
Yee's village had to do its best not to be jealous.

"Lady Nayotake no Kaguya-hime,"
this second prince said. "You who
wear a blue so bright it seems the lark
itself has sung it into existence.
My name is Kuramochi. You can call
me Kura. I want to get married by the way.
To you. Without delay. If I may."

From the kitchen came the sound of quiet snorting.
But Nayotake no Kaguya-hime put a brave face on it
and said, in a very composed and dignified voice:
"You may, by the way.
At least, if you first fulfil the task I set you.
Travel to Penglai.
To the island paradise of Penglai.
Where the trees are decorated with branches of gold,
silver and mother-of-pearl.
Bring me just one of those branches.
A branch from the island of Penglai.
Then we may marry, without delay."

Prince Kura, straight of nose, bowed and said,
"Of course. Island. Now. Whatever you say."
The bamboo cutter, who was just coming home,
saw the prince leave. Followed by sixty royal ponies,
followed by sixty royal clouds of dust.

That very evening the prince dispatched a ship.
But the ship took a different route and returned
seven days later. The prince never even went on board.
He had put a team of jewellers and silversmiths to
work on a fake branch, and yes, he brought that
fake branch to Nayotake no Kaguya-hime.

But, Prince! Straight-nosed Prince!
You forgot something very important!
You forgot to pay the smiths on time.
That made them so angry, they followed you.
And demanded their money just when you, the hero,
were down on your knees offering the gold branch

to our bamboo girl!
And when she asked who they were, you,
Prince, said,
“Um... uh.”

Yee, who was called Nayotake no Kaguya-hime,
looked down on you and said, “Ah. This is no branch
from the island of Penglai. You spent seven days to present
me with an outright lie. Was the furthest horizon too far?
This is my answer: no, no, no.”

Then the old bamboo cutter was suddenly there. He rested his left
hand on his daughter’s shoulder and pointed at the door with his right.
“Prince Kuramochi,” he said, “shall I show you out with your smiths
and your ponies? Or can you find your own way?”

The prince found his own way out.
Behind the village, the mountains thought,
More crooked than we imagined.

*

The third admirer was a government minister. He was the Minister
of the Right, and his name was Abe no Miushi. His eyes were so clear,
the river that ran through the village twisted and coiled at the sight.

“Lady Nayotake no Kaguya-hime,” said the minister,
“you who stand before me in such radiant blue, as if
the wind has blown all the world’s cornflowers together
and made of them a floral dye. My name is Abe no Miushi
and I command you to come with me. Together we will
be happy. I will arrange that by law, and my laws
are made to be obeyed.”

In the kitchen someone coughed. It was the dressmaker,
and after she’d coughed, her daughter coughed too.
It was a double cough, but the minister didn’t hear that.
His eyes opened wider because Nayotake no Kaguya-hime
stood up, turned and began to walk away.

Just before leaving the room, she said, “My Lord, your laws
can only be obeyed if you fetch a coat for me.
A coat made of fire-rat fur.
Because fire-rat fur is fireproof.
Fire-rat fur repels fire.
I don’t want water-rat fur or earth-rat fur. This is my law.
The law I place above yours.”

“Of course,” said Minister Abe.
And while he bowed, he closed his eyes for a moment, because
he wasn’t just bowing for Nayotake no Kaguya-hime,
but for her authority as well.

“It seems,” he told his secretary, “that there is a merchant
in faraway China who sells clothing made of fire-rat fur. Go
to him and tell him the ministry demands his most beautiful coat.”
The secretary was back within a month and so the minister too
was back within a month.

“Here,” he said to Nayotake no Kaguya-hime.
“A-ha,” Nayotake no Kaguya-hime replied and
threw the coat into the fire.

Flames leapt up from the fur.
That’s impossible, thought Minister Abe, but the coat had
already burnt to ashes.
Was it the secretary who had cheated? The merchant or maybe
even the minister himself? We don’t know, but Yee, who
was called Nayotake no Kaguya-hime said, “No. This
is not fire-rat fur. You have spent a month to present me with
an outright lie. Was the furthest horizon too far? This my answer:
No, no, no.”

And when the old bamboo cutter came to the door
to ask if the minister could find his own way out,
the minister dashed off, following the secretary
who had brought him the fake fur. Cursing at the top
of his voice, he ran through the door, out of the garden
and down the road past the river, and it was that same river,
now deeply disappointed and trying to straighten
out all its twists and turns.

The Grand Counsellor came!
But there’s not much to say about the
Grand Counsellor. The mountains and the sun,
the water and the wind – none of them gave
him a second glance.
Ah... that was a sign.
The Grand Counsellor was given the task
of fetching the dragon’s bead necklace.
He sent a ship to the dragon and bought himself
a house that was as big as seven of those ships.
Oh... that was another sign.

The ship sank, so the Grand Counsellor climbed
into a little boat. He stood straight up in that boat
and stamped his foot. “Stupid mountains, stupid sun,
stupid water, stupid wind!”
Ai... that was more than a sign!
The wind looked up and rolled down the mountain.
The sun smiled, then shone so brightly it made the sea boil –
the Grand Counsellor’s boat spun on the waves.
And the Counsellor himself?
He cried eek.
And help.
That was so many signs one after the other that
this part of our Nayotake-no-Kaguya-hime fairy tale
ends here.

(The Counsellor survived,
but he was shaking so much
and so embarrassed, he went home
and hid in his big house,
and then the house got so embarrassed,
it pulled up its brick legs,
walked into the ocean
and drowned.

Yee never saw the Counsellor returning.
She forgot about the dragon's beads
and she forgot the task –
and when she thought of the Counsellor,
she thought:

(nothing.)

After the Grand Counsellor, no admirers
at all came for quite a long time.
Until the day everything started to turn.
That was the day he suddenly appeared.
The boy.
