

The Returnee

Part 2

Matsumoto Satoshi has returned to Japan with his family after living in Atlanta, where his father, or Otosan, had been posted by his robotics company. With his mother, or Okaasan, and his little sister, Momoko, they move in next door to help care for his aging and often confused grandfather, Ojiisan. Satoshi is surprised to be accepted at a very selective high school, but his main interest is baseball. He was a star on his team in America, and his mother sent videos of his games to Ojiisan, who is a big baseball fan. On the first day of school, Satoshi recognizes some old friends, but he also manages to get on the wrong side of his English teacher, Mr. Tanaka. After school, he stops to see his grandfather, where he is met at the door by a robotic baby seal, Nana—a gift from his father to keep Ojiisan company. Ojiisan is watching a video of a game that Satoshi won with a grand slam homerun—his finest moment. “You can learn something from that boy, Masahiro,” the old man says, mistaking Satoshi for his father, as he often does.

THE NEXT MORNING, just before we take off for school, Momoko slides open Ojiisan’s door and yells out, “Bye-bye!” Then she hops on her bike, straps on her helmet, and pedals away. I think about leaving without saying anything, but after watching my sister, I can’t. I’d feel like a cretin. So I slide open the door again and shout out that I’m on my way to school.



by Suzanne
Kamata


Before I can make my getaway, he shuffles into view. He looks even more bent and shriveled than he did yesterday. “Satoshi, is that you?” His voice trembles.

“Yeah, Ojiisan. I’ve gotta go to school now.” His face seems to crumple.

“Are you all right?” I ask. I’m itching to go, but I can’t leave him like this.

“I’m OK,” he says with a big sigh. “But Nana-chan isn’t.”

He motions me into the other room, where I see that Nana-chan, the fluffy white baby seal robot, is not barking, not scooting around with

A CRETIN IS AN IDIOT OR DOPE: 

Illustrated by Ying-Fang Shen

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her flippers, and not blinking. In fact, she—
it?—isn't moving at all. She must need to be
recharged.

"I think you need to, uh, plug it in," I say.
I'm not sure if it's OK to remind him that his
pet is a machine. Maybe we're supposed to act
like it's a living thing.

He drops down to his knees, completely
helpless.

I glance toward the door, then take a
deep breath. This is probably going to make
me late for school, but I'll help him out just
this one time. I turn over the robot and try
to find a place to put in batteries or to plug
in a cord. Nothing. So then I go to his closet
to try to find the box that it came in. The

instructions are probably written on the box.
Ojiisan grew up right after the war when
people didn't have much money. He saves
everything. And what do you know, there it
is on the top shelf of the cupboard where he
keeps his futon.

I pull it down. "World's Best Therapeutic
Pet Robot!" it says on the box. I can feel
something rattling around inside. I lift the
flaps and see the recharger. On one end,
there's a plug. On the other, something that
looks like a miniature pacifier. A pink booklet
with a sketch of a baby seal on the cover—the
instruction manual—is in the box, too. I flip
it open to the part about juicing up the robot,
and then get Nana-chan hooked up.

Ojiisan bends over her while I stick the pacifier in her mouth. It takes a few minutes, but she starts to slowly blink her eyes.

“Everything OK now?” I ask.

“Yes. Thank you so much for helping her,” he says.

“No problem. Well, I’m off then. See you later.”

There are hardly any other bikes out on the sidewalk now. I churn my legs like mad, trying to make up for lost time, but I’m a still a hundred feet away from the front door when I hear the chime signaling the beginning of first period.

I slide open the door at the back of the classroom as quietly as possible and try to skulk to my desk without being noticed. But as soon as I’ve stepped over the threshold, Mr. Tanaka turns from where he’s been writing on the board and looks straight at me.

“Well, Matsumoto,” he says. “I don’t know how things are at schools in America, ‘Land of the Free,’ but here, we have rules. I expect you to be in your seat when the bell rings.”

I feel my face go all red. I know that a guy like Mr. Tanaka isn’t interested in hearing my excuses for being late. “I’m sorry, sir,” I say. “It won’t happen again.”

He stares at me for a moment longer, then goes back to writing on the board.

AFTER SCHOOL, I put on my practice uniform and join the other baseball players at the diamond.

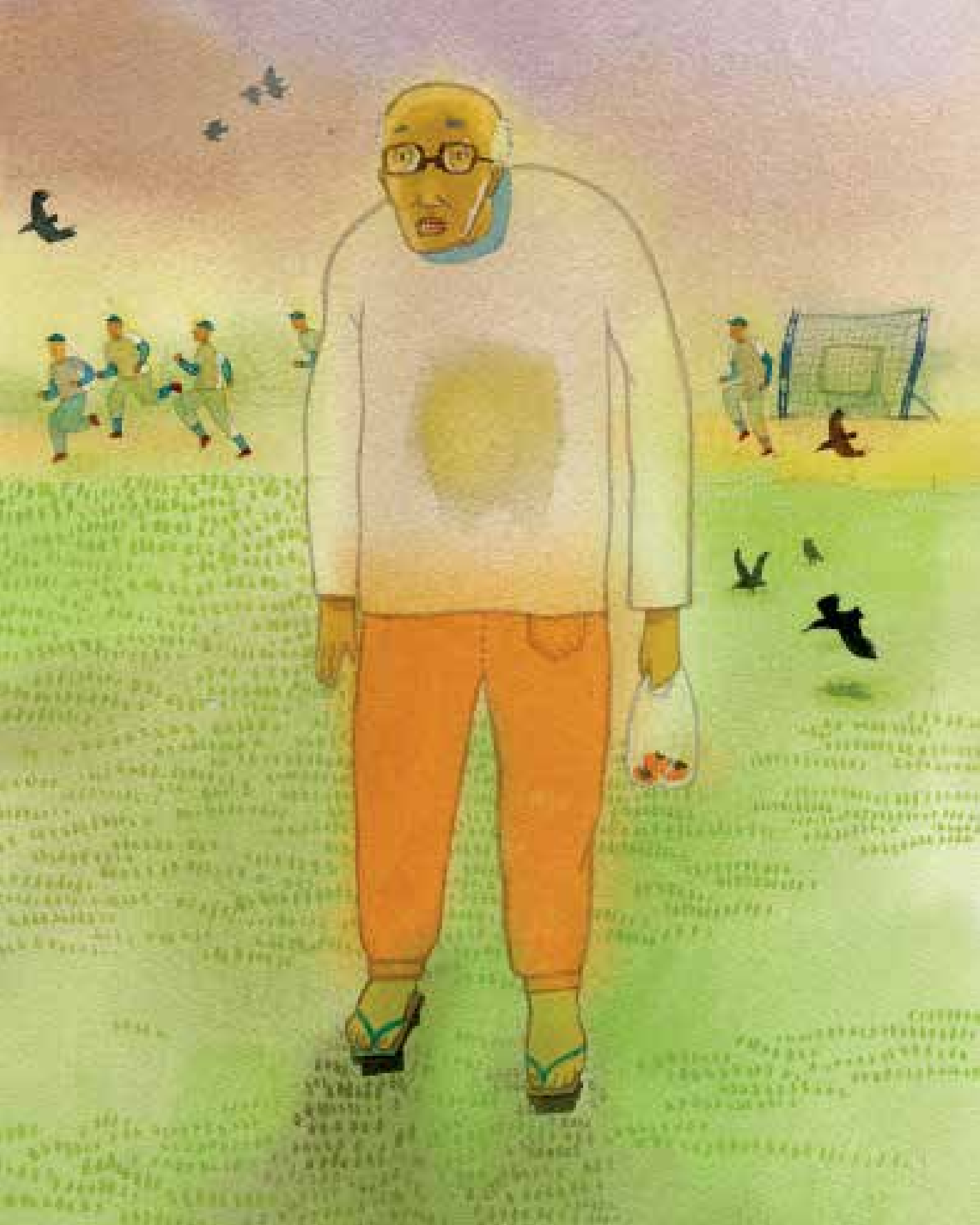
While we’re hauling crates of balls onto the field and setting up nets, someone pulls up in a car and gets out—some guy who’s come to see the coach, maybe a rep from a sporting goods store. The players near the edge of the field stop in their tracks, doff their caps, and bow to him, saying *Konnichiwa!*—Good day! This is what we’re supposed to do every time we have a visitor.

When everything’s all prepped, Junji and I pair up for stretching and catch. We’ve got a nice rhythm going, the ball volleying back and forth between us, so that I hardly notice when another visitor comes by. Out of the corner of my eye, I see some of my teammates pause and bow and hear them shout out a greeting, but I’m just thinking about the ball coming toward me. It smacks into my mitt. I grab it with my other hand, pull back my arm for the throw, and fire it to Junji.

But this time he doesn’t raise his arm, doesn’t even try to catch the ball. It shoots over his shoulder and crashes into the dirt behind him. Junji’s not looking at me or the ball. His attention is off to the side, where the visitor is.

“Satoshi, isn’t that . . . ?”

I shield my eyes from the sun and look over to where he’s pointing. Coach is talking to someone. Not the guy from the sporting goods store, but another man, a smaller man who looks like he’s stooping. He looks somehow familiar, but it takes another second before my stomach goes all cold and I realize who it is.



"My grandfather," I say, finishing Junji's sentence. What is he doing here? "Excuse me for a second." I dash over to the fence.

Coach Ogawa is talking to Ojiisan, who's smiling and nodding, as if they know each other. Some of the other players glance over at me as I walk up to them.

He's wearing a long-sleeved, white T-shirt with a big brown stain on the front, and sweatpants, but they're on backwards. And on his feet, he's got on the same sandals that he wears to shuffle around in the yard. I look around for a bicycle, or even a car that he might have used to get here, but there's nothing. He must have come on foot. It would take someone like me about half an hour to walk here from our house. For him, maybe an hour.

I catch Coach Ogawa's eye, take my cap off, and bow. "I'm so sorry about this. He's my grandfather. I'll take him home."

"Satoshi-kun," Ojiisan says. "I thought you boys might be hungry." He holds up a plastic bag of dried persimmons. There's hardly enough for the entire team, but Coach Ogawa thanks him and takes the bag. Then he steps away to give us some privacy.

"Does anyone know you're here? Mom?"

He scrunches up his face. "I don't know where your mother is."

"Wait here," I say. I go into the clubhouse, where I've stashed my gear, and dig my cell phone out of my bag. I try calling the house, but no one answers. I could send him home on my bicycle, but he might get lost. I guess I'll have to walk him home.

I gather up my stuff and tell Coach Ogawa that I'm leaving.

"OK," he says. "See you tomorrow."

I'm a little surprised he's being so nice about this, but I'm grateful. "Thank you, sir."

Ojiisan is still waiting by the fence. We walk to where my bicycle is parked, and I look at his sandals. "Why don't you take the bike?" I say. "I'll walk along behind." His feet must be hurting, because he doesn't object.

It takes forty-five minutes to get back to the house. Ojiisan's going slowly so that I can keep up, or maybe because his legs are tired from walking. The bike wobbles a little, but he doesn't fall down. I jog alongside him, my eyes on the sidewalk. Meanwhile, Ojiisan greets every single person we come across—a granny out for a walk with a baby strapped to her back; some kids squatting by the side of the road; a middle-aged couple out for their exercise. Some greet him back. Some, like the kids, just stare at him.

When we get home, I find the front door unlocked. I slide open the door and hear a *yip yip!* Nana-chan appears in the entryway.

Ojiisan leans down and strokes her fur. "That's a good girl," he says.

AT LUNCH THE next day, I sit with Junji. "I can't believe my grandfather showed up at practice yesterday," I say.

Junji shrugs, his mouth stuffed full of rice. After he swallows he says, "My grandmother is always wandering around, too. Sometimes we have to call the volunteer

fire department to help find her. Once, the whole neighborhood was out looking half the night.”

“Where did she go?”

“Someone found her sitting in a rice paddy. She didn’t even know where she was,” Junji says. He shakes his head at the memory. “I guess that’s what happens when you get old.”

LATER, AT THE end of practice, as I’m shoving my gear back into my bag, Coach taps me on the shoulder.

“That was some nice batting,” he says.

“Thank you.” I duck my head, try to be modest. I don’t mean to brag, but I’m sort of used to hearing this kind of praise. I heard it all the time from Coach Harris and my teammates in Atlanta, but I’m glad that Coach Ogawa recognizes my ability.

“But you need to work on your bunting,” he adds.

My bunting? In the States, no one cares about the bunt. There were a few guys on my team who were masters at laying the ball in the dirt—not me—but it wasn’t a necessary skill. It was far better to be able to blast the ball out of the park, which is something I can do.

I’m not about to say all that to the coach, however. Instead, I look up at him and say, “Yes, sir. I’ll do my best.”

IN ANOTHER WEEK, Coach will be announcing the names of the sixteen players who will be on the roster for the summer tournament. Today’s practice is intense, and

everyone seems to be trying harder than before. During our scrimmage, while stuck out in right field, Shintaro goes racing after a ball, even though it’s clearly foul. Junji is especially focused at the plate and hits a double. And me, I show everyone just how well I can bunt. At the end of practice, when our gear is stowed and the field is raked smooth, Coach gathers us around.

“Starting tomorrow,” he says, “I expect to see you out here at six thirty. We’ll be having morning practice in addition to afternoon sessions until the tournament.”

No one groans, no one protests. Instead, we all stand with our backs straight and say, “Hai!”

ON MONDAY, Mr. Tanaka tells us that he’s made a new seating chart. I’m now in the front row, off to the right. Now that I’m in the first row, with no one to hide behind, Mr. Tanaka can tell whenever I’m not paying attention.

He writes a list of idioms on the blackboard, the chalk squeaking every third or fourth word. *It’s raining cats and dogs. These are the dog days of summer. It’s a dog eat dog world.* Mr. Tanaka tells us we never know when one of these expressions might turn up on an important test.

I write a few in my notebook while trying not to yawn. I’m too tired to care about cats and dogs and the rain coming down. I’ve been up since five a.m. because we had our first morning practice session today. I put my head down—just for a minute—and fall asleep.

BUNTING
IS WHEN A
PLAYER BATS
THE BALL
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ONLY ROLLS
A FEW FEET.





I'm dreaming that I'm tucked into my futon. Everything is warm and soft. My body is totally relaxed. And then . . . *thwack!*

My head jerks up. "Wh-what?" I wipe the drool off my chin.

Mr. Tanaka is standing in front of my desk with a rolled up textbook in his hand. "Did you have a nice nap?" he asks in a syrupy voice.

I rub the back of my head where he hit me. At any other school, the teachers would understand how tired we baseball players are. Didn't he see us running at seven this morning? Doesn't he know that we'll have

practice again this afternoon until well after dark? And that after that, we'll go home and study?

And who cares if we do well on standardized tests? If we make it to Koshien, our futures will be set. Everyone knows how much effort and sacrifice and cooperation it takes to get to that level. My father says that even at his company, a guy who's played at Koshien is pretty much a shoo-in for promotions.

How's that for an English idiom?

KOSHIE IS A
NATIONWIDE
HIGH SCHOOL
BASEBALL
TOURNAMENT
THAT IS
EXTREMELY
POPULAR IN
JAPAN.



to be continued