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CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN

SAYAKA MURATA

A NOVEL



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STORE
WOMAN**

SAYAKA MURATA

Translated from the Japanese by
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A convenience store is a world of sound. From the tinkle of the door chime to the voices of TV celebrities advertising new products over the in-store cable network, to the calls of the store workers, the beeps of the bar code scanner, the rustle of customers picking up items and placing them in baskets, and the clacking of heels walking around the store. It all blends into the convenience store sound that ceaselessly caresses my eardrums.

I hear the faint rattle of a new plastic bottle rolling into place as a customer takes one out of the refrigerator, and look up instantly. A cold drink is often the last item customers take before coming to the checkout till, and my body responds automatically to the sound. I see a woman holding a bottle of mineral water while perusing the desserts and look back down.

As I arrange the display of newly delivered rice balls, my body picks up information from the multitude of sounds around the store. At this time of day, rice balls, sandwiches, and salads are what sell best. Another part-timer, Sugawara, is over at the other side of the store checking off items with a handheld scanner. I continue laying out the pristine, machine-made food neatly on the shelves of the cold display: in the middle I place two rows of the new flavor, spicy cod roe with cream cheese, alongside two rows of the store's best-selling flavor, tuna mayonnaise, and then I line the less popular dry bonito shavings in soy sauce flavor next to those. Speed is of the essence, and I barely use my head as the rules ingrained in me issue instructions directly to my body.

Alerted by a faint clink of coins I turn and look over at the cash register. It's a sound I'm sensitive to, since customers who come just to buy cigarettes or a newspaper often jingle coins in their hand or pocket. And yes: as I'd thought, a man with a can of coffee in one hand, the other hand in his pocket, is approaching the till. I quickly move through the store, slide behind the counter, and stand at the ready so as not to keep him waiting.

“Irasshaimasé! Good morning, sir.”

I bow and take the can of coffee he holds out to me.

“Oh, and a pack of Marlboro Menthol Lights.”

“Right away, sir.” I take out a pack of the cigarettes and scan the bar code. “Please confirm your age on the touch screen.”

As he does so, I notice him glance at the hot-food cabinet. I could ask him whether he’d like anything else, but when a customer appears to be dithering over whether or not to buy something, I make a point of taking a step back and waiting.

“And a corn dog.”

“Right away, sir. Thank you.”

I disinfect my hands with alcohol, open the hot cabinet, and take out a corn dog.

“Shall I put the hot food and cold drink in separate bags?”

“Oh no, don’t bother. Together’s fine.”

I put the can of coffee, cigarettes, and corn dog into a small-size bag. Until then the man had been jingling the coins in his pocket, but now he suddenly moves his hand to his breast pocket as though something has just occurred to him. Instantly I deduce that he will use electronic money.

“I’ll pay by Suica.”

“Certainly, sir. Please touch your card here.”

I automatically read the customer’s minutest movements and gaze, and my body acts reflexively in response. My ears and eyes are important sensors to catch their every move and desire. Taking the utmost care not to cause the customer any discomfort by observing him or her too closely, I swiftly move my hands according to whatever signals I pick up.

“Your receipt, sir. Thank you for your custom!”

“Thanks,” he says, taking his receipt and leaving.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting,” I say with a bow to the woman next in the queue. “Irasshaimasé. Good morning!”

The morning period is passing normally in the brightly lit box of the convenience store, I feel. Visible outside the windows, polished free of fingerprints, are the figures of people rushing by. It is the start of another day, the time when the world wakes up and the cogs of society begin to

move. I am one of those cogs, going round and round. I have become a functioning part of the world, rotating in the time of day called morning.

I am just running to put out more rice balls when our supervisor, Mrs. Izumi, calls out to me. “Miss Furukura, how many five-thousand-yen notes are there left in that till?”

“Um, only two.”

“Oh dear, there must have been a lot of customers paying with ten-thousand-yen notes. There aren’t many left in the safe either. I’d better go to the bank this morning, once the rush and deliveries have calmed down.”

“Yes, thank you!”

Mrs. Izumi is a casual worker about the same age as me, but the night shift has been so short of staff lately that the store manager has been doing nights and putting her in charge during the day, as though she were a regular staff member sent from head office.

“Okay then, I’ll go for change around ten o’clock. And while I’m thinking about it, there happens to be a special order for sushi pockets today, so please keep an eye out for the customer when he comes to collect it.”

“I will!”

I look at the clock: almost nine thirty. The morning rush is nearly over, and I have to finish dealing with the delivery and start preparing for the lunchtime rush. I stretch my back and go out into the store to finish putting out the rice balls.

* * *

The time before I was reborn as a convenience store worker is somewhat unclear in my memory. I was born into a normal family and lovingly brought up in a normal suburban residential area. But everyone thought I was a rather strange child.

There was the time when I was in nursery school, for example, when I saw a dead bird in the park. It was small, a pretty blue, and must have been someone’s pet. It lay there with its neck twisted and eyes closed, and the

other children were all standing around it crying. One girl started to ask: “What should we—” But before she could finish I snatched it up and ran over to the bench where my mother was chatting with the other mothers.

“What’s up, Keiko? Oh! A little bird ... where did it come from I wonder?” she said gently, stroking my hair. “The poor thing. Shall we make a grave for it?”

“Let’s eat it!” I said.

“What?”

“Daddy likes yakitori, doesn’t he? Let’s grill it and have it for dinner!”

She looked at me, startled. Thinking she hadn’t heard properly, I repeated what I’d said, this time clearly enunciating my words. The mother sitting next to her gaped at me, her eyes, nostrils, and mouth forming perfect O’s. She looked so comical I almost burst out laughing. But then I saw her staring at the bird in my hand and I realized that one of these little birds probably wouldn’t be enough for Daddy.

“Shall I get some more?” I asked, glancing at two or three other birds strutting around.

“Keiko!” my mother exclaimed reprovingly, finally coming to her senses. “Let’s make a grave for Mr. Budgie and bury him. Look, everyone’s crying. His friends must be sad he died. The poor little thing!”

“But it’s *dead*. Let’s eat it!”

My mother was speechless, but I was captivated by the vision of my parents and little sister happily tucking in around the dinner table. My father was always saying how tasty yakitori was, and what was that if not grilled bird? There were lots more there in the park, so all we had to do was catch some and take them home. I couldn’t understand why should we bury the bird instead of eating it.

“Look how cute little Mr. Budgie is!” my mother said earnestly. “Let’s make a grave for him over there, and everyone can lay flowers on it.”

And that’s what we did. Everyone was crying for the poor dead bird as they went around murdering flowers, plucking their stalks, exclaiming, “What lovely flowers! Little Mr. Budgie will definitely be pleased.” They looked so bizarre I thought they must all be out of their minds.

We buried the bird in a hole dug on the other side of a fence with a sign that said KEEP OUT and placed the flower corpses on top of it. Someone brought an ice lolly stick from the trash can to use as a grave marker.

“Poor little bird. It’s so sad, isn’t it Keiko?” my mother kept murmuring, as if trying to convince me. But I didn’t think it was sad at all.

There were many other similar incidents. There was also that big commotion soon after I started primary school, when some boys started fighting during the break time.

The other kids started wailing, “Get a teacher!” and “Someone stop them!” And so I went to the tool shed, took out a spade, ran over to the unruly boys, and bashed one of them over the head. Everyone started screaming as he fell down clutching his skull. Seeing as he’d stopped moving, my attention turned to the other boy, and I raised the spade again. “Keiko-chan, stop! Please stop!” the girls shouted at me tearfully.

Some teachers came over and, dumbfounded, demanded I explain myself.

“Everyone was saying to stop them, so that’s what I did.”

Violence was wrong, the bewildered teachers told me in confusion.

“But everyone was saying to stop Yamazaki-kun and Aoki-kun fighting! I just thought that would be the quickest way to do it,” I explained patiently. Why on earth were they so angry? I just didn’t get it.

They held a teacher’s meeting, and my mother was called to the school. Seeing her bowing to the teachers, apologizing over and over, her face strangely serious, I finally realized that maybe I shouldn’t have done what I did, but I still couldn’t understand why.

It was the same that time when our young class teacher became hysterical and began bawling and hitting her desk furiously with the attendance register, and everyone started crying. She wouldn’t calm down even when everyone started begging, “We’re sorry, Miss!” “Please stop, Miss!” So in order to shut her up I ran over and yanked her skirt and knickers down. She was so shocked she burst into tears, but at least she became quiet.

The teacher from the next class came running in and asked me what had happened, so I explained that I’d once seen on TV how a grown-up woman

who was all worked up went quiet after someone took her clothes off. But then they held another teachers' meeting and my mother was summoned again.

"I wonder why you can't understand, Keiko ..." she muttered helplessly on the way home, hugging me to her. It seemed I'd done something wrong again, but I couldn't for the life of me understand what was the problem.

My parents were at a loss what to do about me, but they were as affectionate to me as ever. I'd never meant to make them sad or have to keep apologizing for things I did, so I decided to keep my mouth shut as best I could outside home. I would no longer do anything of my own accord, and would either just mimic what everyone else was doing, or simply follow instructions.

After this, the adults seemed relieved when I didn't say a single word more than necessary or act on my own initiative. But as I got older, being so quiet apparently became a problem in itself. As far as I was concerned, though, keeping my mouth shut was the most sensible approach to getting by in life. Even when my teachers wrote in my school report that I should make more friends and play outside more, I doggedly refused to say anything more than absolutely necessary.

My little sister, who is two years younger than me, was a normal child. Even so, she never tried to avoid me; indeed, she adored me. Unlike me she was always being told off for silly little things, and whenever this happened I would go up to mother and ask her why she was so angry. This generally put an end to the lecture, and my sister always thanked me for it as if she thought I were protecting her. It also helped that I wasn't all that interested in sweets and toys and would often give them to her, and so she was always hanging around me.

My family always loved and cherished me, and that's why they were so worried and wanted to cure me. I recall hearing my parents discussing how to do this, and wondered what it was about me that needed correcting. My father once drove me some distance to another town to meet a therapist. The therapist immediately assumed there must be some problem at home, but really there wasn't. My father, a bank clerk, was a mild and steady type, while my mother was kind if a little timid, and my little sister was really

fond of me. “For the time being, shower her with affection and let’s see how things go” was the bland conclusion, and so my parents assiduously brought me up with loving care.

I didn’t make any friends at school, but I wasn’t particularly picked on or bullied, and I managed to get myself through elementary and secondary without saying anything uncalled for.

I didn’t even change after graduating from high school and going on to university. I basically spent my free time alone, and didn’t talk to anyone in private at all. I never repeated the kind of trouble I’d caused in primary school, but still my parents worried that I wouldn’t survive in the real world. And so, believing that I had to be cured, I grew into adulthood.

* * *

The Smile Mart outside Hiromachi Station opened on May 1, 1998, soon after I started university.

I can still clearly recall the moment I came across the as-yet-unopened store. I’d been to see a Noh performance as part of my coursework and, not having any friends, was making my way home alone when I took a wrong turn and found myself in a completely unfamiliar office district, totally lost.

It occurred to me all of a sudden that the place was deserted. I was alone in a world of graceful white buildings, an artificial scene of paper models. It was Sunday afternoon, and there was no sign of anyone other than me in the street. It was like a ghost town.

Overwhelmed by a sensation of having stumbled into another dimension, I walked quickly through it looking for a metro station. At last I saw a sign and, relieved, was running toward it when I came across the ground floor of a pure white building converted into what looked like an aquarium.

It didn’t have a signboard, or anything else other than a notice stuck on the glass window: HIROMACHI STATION SMILE MART—OPENING SOON! STAFF WANTED. I timidly peeked through the glass. There was nobody there, and it appeared still to be under construction, with plastic coverings on the walls and lines

of empty white shelves. It was hard to believe this vacant space would soon be a convenience store.

The allowance I received from home was enough for me to live on, but still I was interested in some part-time work. I made a note of the number, went home, and called the next day. After a brief interview, I was given the job on the spot.

Training would start the following week I was told, and when I headed for the store at the appointed time, I found it looking a little more like a convenience store, now partly stocked, with some stationery, handkerchiefs, and other sundries neatly displayed.

There were some other new employees gathered inside: a girl who appeared to be a student like me, a guy who looked like a typical job-hopper, a slightly older woman, probably a housewife—all in all, fifteen very different-looking people of all ages slouched awkwardly about the store.

Eventually the trainer from head office appeared and handed out uniforms to everyone. I put mine on and tidied myself up according to the checklist stuck on the wall. Once those of us with long hair had tied it back, and all of us had removed watches and any other accessories as instructed, the motley bunch did actually now look like convenience store workers.

First we practiced the various phrases we needed to use in the store. Standing shoulder to shoulder in a line, our backs straight, we lifted the corners of our mouths to match the smiling face in the training poster and in turn called out the stock welcoming phrase: *Irasshaimasé!*

The male trainer checked each of us one by one, instructing us to try again if our voices were too quiet or our expressions too stiff. “Miss Okamoto, don’t be so shy. Smile! Mr. Aizaki, speak up a bit! Try again. Miss Furukura, that’s perfect. Nice and spirited—keep it up!” I was good at mimicking the trainer’s examples and the model video he’d shown us in the back room. It was the first time anyone had ever taught me how to accomplish a normal facial expression and manner of speech.

For the two weeks prior to opening, we worked in pairs to role-play dealing with imaginary customers. We practiced looking the customer in the eye, smiling and bowing, cleaning our hands with alcohol before handling

items from the hot-food cabinet, putting hot and cold items into separate bags, and sanitary products into paper bags. The money in the till was real so we would become accustomed to handling it, but the receipts were marked TRAINING in big letters, and our “customers” were our fellow uniformed workers, so it was rather like playing at shop.

It was fun to see all kinds of people—from university students and guys who played in bands to job-hoppers, housewives, and kids studying for their high school diploma at night school—don the same uniform and transform into the homogenous being known as a convenience store worker. Once the day’s training was over, everyone removed their uniforms and reverted to their original state. It was like changing costumes to become a different creature.

After two weeks of training, at long last opening day arrived. I arrived at the store in the morning to find the empty white shelves now fully stocked, the tightly packed items looking somehow unreal.

Finally, it was time. This is the real thing, I thought to myself as the doors opened. Real customers, not the imaginary ones projected in training. And there were all kinds. Being in an office district, I’d had an image of all our customers in business suits or uniforms, but the people waiting outside appeared to be a group of local residents. I watched on in blank amazement as a little old lady walking with a stick came in first, followed by a long stream of customers clutching discount vouchers for rice balls and lunch boxes.

“Hey, Miss Furukura, don’t forget to greet our customers!” the manager prompted me.

“Irasshaimasé!” I blurted out, pulling myself together. “Today we are holding a sale to celebrate opening the store. Please look around!”

Even the set phrases we’d been taught to use sounded completely different now that there were customers in the store.

I never knew customers could be so loud! Their footsteps echoed and voices rang out as they walked around the store, confectionery packs rustling as they tossed them into their baskets, the refrigerator door clunking open and shut as they took out cold drinks. Overwhelmed by the sheer volume, I kept yelling out “Irasshaimasé!” over and over again.

The mountain of food and confectionery that was so perfectly displayed it looked artificial soon crumbled under their hands. The store had looked almost fake, but now under their touch it was being vividly transformed.

The first at the cash register was the same little old lady who had been the first through the door. I stood at the till, mentally running through the manual as she put her basket containing a choux crème, a sandwich, and several rice balls down on the counter.

All the staff behind the counter straightened as she approached. Aware of their eyes on me, I bowed to her the way I'd learned in training.

“Irasshaimasé!” I called out in precisely the same tone as the woman in the training video as I pulled the basket toward me and began scanning the bar codes, just as we'd been taught. The manager stood at my side, briskly placing the products in a plastic bag.

“What time do you open?” she asked.

“Um, today we opened at ten. From now on we'll be open all the time!”

Noting how inept I was at answering questions we hadn't practiced in training, the manager quickly followed up with: “From now on we shall be open twenty-four hours, seven days a week, year-round. Please come and shop here at your convenience.”

“Oh my, you're open at night too? And early in the morning?”

“Yes,” I told her, nodding.

“How very convenient! It's hard for me to walk with my bad hip, you see. The supermarket is so far away. It's been such a bother,” she said, giving me a smile.

“Yes, we'll be open twenty-four hours from now on. Please come at your convenience,” I said, echoing the phrases the manager had used.

“That's wonderful. It'll be hard on you store workers, though.”

“Thank you!” I said, enthusiastically bowing the way the manager had done.

The woman laughed and said, “Thank *you*, I'll come again,” and moved away from the till.