

Sweet Bean Paste

‘Poignant, poetic,
sensual’

Lausanne Cites



**Durian
Sukegawa**

Sweet Bean Paste

A charming tale of friendship, love and loneliness in contemporary Japan

‘Somehow this mixture of grief and solace, cherry blossoms and red beans is a recipe for happiness.’

Radio SRF 2 Kultur Kompakt

‘An ode to cuisine and to life. Poignant, poetic, sensual: a treat.’

Lausanne Cités

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Durian Sukegawa

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Author's Note
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1

A sweetly scented breeze blew along Cherry Blossom Street.

Sentaro stood over a hot griddle inside the Doraharu shop, as he did all day everyday, cooking pancakes for his dorayaki. Cherry Blossom Street was a run-down commercial strip in a depressed part of town, a street more notable for empty shops than the cherry trees planted sparsely on either side. Today, however, perhaps because the flowers were in full bloom, there were more people about than usual.

Sentaro looked up to see an elderly lady in a white hat standing on the roadside, but immediately turned back to the bowl of batter he was mixing. He assumed she was looking at the billowing cloud of cherry blossom on the tree outside the shop. When he next looked up, however, she was still there. And it wasn't the flowers, but rather Sentaro himself that she seemed to be observing. He nodded automatically in greeting. The woman smiled stiffly and shuffled closer.

Sentaro recognized her face. She had been at the shop a few days earlier.

'About this,' she said, raising her hand with a slow, deliberate motion to point at a Help Wanted notice taped to the window. 'Do you *really* mean "age is no object"?''

Sentaro paused in his work. He noticed that her fingers were bent like hooks. 'Got someone in mind? A grandchild, perhaps?'

The woman blinked one eye. A gentle gust of wind shook the tree, setting adrift petals that wafted through the open window to land on the griddle. 'Um...' She leaned forward, 'I wonder if I could I apply?'

'Pardon?'

She pointed to herself. 'Can I apply? I always wanted a job like this.'

Sentaro laughed before he could stop himself. 'May I ask how old you are?'

'I'm seventy-six.'

How could he send her away without causing offence? Sentaro scraped the spatula on the edge of the bowl while he groped for the right words.

'Well, the pay's not much. I can only manage six hundred yen an hour.'

'Sorry? What's that?' The woman cupped her hand around her ear.

Sentaro leaned over, the way he did when he handed dorayaki to children and elderly customers.

'I said the pay's not much. I appreciate the offer, but I'm not sure. At your age...'

'Oh, you mean the pay.' She ran her bent fingers over the words on the notice. 'I'll do it for half that. Three hundred yen.'

'Three hundred yen?'

The woman's eyes crinkled in a smile beneath the brim of her hat.

'Ah, I think...No, I'm afraid it won't work. I hope you understand.'

'My name's Tokue Yoshii.'

'Sorry?' Sentaro realized that she must be hard of hearing and misunderstood. He shook his

head to signal his meaning. 'I do apologize.'

'Oh?' Tokue Yoshii stared at Sentaro. He noticed that her eyes were different shapes, and one side of her face appeared stiff.

'It's heavy work, you know. It'd be a bit...'

Tokue opened her mouth as if to take a deep breath, then suddenly pointed behind her. 'Who planted this cherry tree?'

'Pardon?'

'The cherry tree,' she repeated, turning her face toward the blossoms. 'Who planted it?'

Sentaro looked up at the flowers, now at their peak. 'What do you mean, who?'

'*Somebody* must've planted it.'

'Sorry, don't know. I don't come from round here.'

Unspoken thoughts flitted across Tokue's face, but seeing Sentaro pick up the rubber spatula, she simply said, 'I'll see you again,' and backed away from the window. She walked off in the opposite direction from the train station with an awkward, stiff gait. Sentaro looked down and went back to his mixing.

2

Doraharu opened for business seven days a week, all year round. Every morning, come eleven o'clock, Sentaro would raise the shutters for the day. He usually donned his cook's clothes just two hours before opening time to begin preparing the pancake batter and sweet bean paste for making dorayaki. Most confectioners spent longer than that, but things were done differently at Doraharu.

Today, like any other day, Sentaro drank his regular morning can of coffee and then proceeded to kick-push a cardboard box into the kitchen from the pavement outside. It contained a delivery of Chinese-made *tsubuan*, the coarse sweet bean paste that he used for his dorayaki filling. His late boss had always used readymade bean paste and Sentaro simply continued the practice. A friendly wholesaler regularly delivered five-kilogram boxes of it.

Sentaro took a plastic tub from inside, and set about mixing the contents with leftover bean paste from the day before. Operations at Doraharu relied heavily on the fact that bean paste could be refrigerated for short periods without too much loss of aroma or quality. Although it was not illegal to recycle the filling in this fashion, this was not exactly standard procedure with most confectioners.

But that was how things were done at Doraharu, a business that did just enough trade to stay afloat. Sentaro never sold enough to use up a whole container of bean paste in one day; there were always leftovers. Every morning he combined the previous day's leftover bean paste with a new batch so that eventually it all got used up.

Once the bean paste was ready Sentaro began preparing the batter. This was also available for supply by wholesalers, but it was expensive, and so he preferred to make it himself. He heaped the ingredients in a bowl, mixed them together, and turned on the gas to heat the flat griddle. When the temperature was right he carefully ladled spoonfuls of batter onto the hot surface with the gong-shaped spoon from which dorayaki took their name: *dora* for gong, and *yaki* for grilled. Once the small, fluffy pancakes were ready he arranged them in rows in a heated glass case to keep warm. Now it was time to open. Sentaro sighed as he lifted the shutters from inside, a blank expression on his face.

Lunchtime came and Sentaro was sitting in the shop's kitchen picking at a lunch from the convenience store when he saw a white hat appear on the other side of the window.

'The old lady,' he muttered.

She was smiling at him, and he felt obliged to stand up. 'Err, hello again.'

'Hello.'

'Can I do something for you?'

Tokue pulled a piece of paper from her handbag. 'This is how I write my name.'

'Huh?' Sentaro glanced at the paper. Her name was written in blue ink, in a distinctive style with every stroke formed by a curling flourish. 'Sorry,' he said, 'but you still can't work here.'

He pushed the paper back to her.

Tokue went to pick it up with her bent fingers, but then seemed to change her mind and gently withdrew her hand. 'As you can see, I have a bit of trouble with my fingers, so I don't mind working for less than I said last time. Two hundred yen will do.'

'For what?'

'My hourly pay.'

'That's not the issue.'

Sentaro repeated what he'd said before about not being able to hire her. Tokue's reaction was to simply stare back at him, like last time. Sentaro stepped away from the counter and reached into the warmer to take out a dorayaki. He thought that if he gave her one maybe she would go away.

'Do you make the bean paste yourself?' Tokue suddenly asked, as if she'd read his mind.

'Ah, that's um, a trade secret.' Sentaro replied, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously.

Had she seen something? He looked over his shoulder to check. The tub of sweet bean paste was sitting in plain view on the kitchen bench next to his lunch, with the lid off and a spoon sticking out to boot. Sentaro shuffled sideways to block Tokue's view.

'I had one of your dorayaki the other day. The pancake wasn't too bad, I thought, but the bean paste, well...'

'The bean paste?'

'Yes. I couldn't tell anything about the feelings of the person who made it.'

'You couldn't? That's strange.' Sentaro made a face as if to show how regrettable that was, though he knew full well his bean paste could reveal no such thing.

'It was sort of...lacking.'

'Bean paste is very difficult, you know. Listen, lady— err, Ma'am. Have you ever made it?'

'I certainly have. I've been making it for fifty years.'

Sentaro almost dropped the dorayaki he was about to put in a paper bag. 'Fifty years?'

'Yes, half a century. Bean paste is all about feeling, young man.'

'Oh. Feeling, eh,' Sentaro said as he pushed the dorayaki package toward Tokue. For one fleeting moment he felt buffeted, as if by a sudden gust of wind.

'But...'

He hesitated. 'Sorry. I still can't hire you.'

'Really?'

'I'm sorry. That's how it is.'

Tokue stared at him with her mismatched eyes, then pulled a cloth purse from her handbag.

'That's okay,' he said. 'It's on the house.'

'Why? 'It costs 140 yen, doesn't it?' She fumbled about in her purse to extract the coins. It took some time for her to find a 100-yen coin and four 10-yen coins, then line them up on the narrow counter beneath the window. Every finger was slightly crooked and her thumb was bent backwards. 'Young man...'

'What?'

Tokue rummaged in her bag again. 'Try some of this,' she said, pulling out a round Tupperware container in a plastic bag. Sentaro could see through the bag that it contained a dark substance.

'What is it?' As Sentaro picked up the container, Tokue began edging away from the counter. 'Is this bean paste?'

But she was already gone, and only turned back to give a quick nod before disappearing around the corner.

3

That night, Sentaro went out for a drink. He chose a noodle restaurant in the downtown area, where he ordered warmed sake accompanied by a small side-dish of tempura and soba noodles in hot broth. Over sips of sake interspersed with mouthfuls of food, he thought about the day's events.

After Tokue's departure, Sentaro had tossed the Tupperware container straight into the rubbish bin. It wasn't as if he didn't feel bad about doing this, he just didn't want to get in any deeper. Every time he lifted the bin lid, however, it met his eyes, until eventually he was moved to fish it out. He intended to have a small taste – just a mouthful – to satisfy his conscience and be done with it. But that one mouthful brought an exclamation of astonishment to his lips.

Tokue's bean paste was like nothing he had ever tasted before. It had a rich aroma, and sweetness that spread across his palette. The substance he bought in plastic containers could not compare.

'Fifty years, eh?' he mused, lifting the sake cup to his lips again and recalling the taste which had so unexpectedly rooted him to the spot. 'She's been making it longer than I've been alive.'

He looked at the restaurant menu tacked to the wall. The noodle chef had handwritten it himself with a brush, and whenever Sentaro saw that careful calligraphy it always reminded him of his mother.

'That old lady'd be about the same age as Mum.' In his mind he saw his mother's small frame seated at a low floor table, her shoulders rounded as she bent over, writing deftly on the stationery spread out before her.

Sentaro tended to cut his memories short at this point. Usually he tried not to think about his long-dead mother and the father he'd not seen in a decade. Tonight, however, he couldn't manage to keep the memories at bay. An image of the mother who had taught him to read and write as a small boy refused to leave his mind.

'Oh, hell.' Sentaro expelled a stream of sake-laden breath. By the time he was out from behind bars his mother was no longer in this world.

You never knew what the future held, he mused. Look at the path he'd ended up on, instead of becoming a writer as he hoped. And how he had passed the days these last few years, standing in front of a griddle cooking dorayaki. Never once had he imagined himself doing that.

Sentaro filled his cup with more sake and gulped down the strong alcohol without pause, as if to wash away a bitterness that had built up in his mouth.

Memories of his mother...She was softly spoken but troubled by anxieties beneath the surface that she could not conceal. Then there were the loud disputes with his father, and arguments with relatives that made her cry and scream. As a child Sentaro had been frightened by these outbursts, that's why he'd wished there could always be cake on the table. Because his mother had a sweet tooth, and whenever they had the sweet things that she liked, such as *manju* buns or cake, she would be in a good mood and he could also feel at peace. He loved his mother when she smiled and said to him, 'Mm, isn't this delicious, Sen?'

Again he thought of Tokue Yoshii's remarkable bean paste. He tried to imagine his mother's expression if she had still been alive to taste it. What would she have said?

This thought led to another. Maybe there were people who would be pleased by it. And, he added to himself, it would only cost 200 yen an hour. Was the old lady really serious? If that was all she wanted, maybe he could have her help out.

Sentaro considered the possibility.

He didn't have that notice in the window because business was so busy he needed help. He simply wanted somebody around for company. Dorayaki weren't much as conversation partners.

Would the old lady really take two hundred yen?

He did the calculations in his drink-fuddled head. If he paid Tokue Yoshii the amount she proposed, it'd be as good as free labour. On top of which he'd get that amazing sweet bean paste thrown in! Then if sales went up as a result, he might be able to increase his monthly debt repayments, and that would mean he could move forward his day of release from this toil.

But – and here Sentaro's hand holding the sake cup wavered in mid-air – he couldn't help feeling uncomfortable about her fingers. He saw them in his mind. No doubt customers would balk too if they noticed them.

Another idea flashed into his head: he could get her to just make the sweet bean paste. Sentaro nodded to himself. Yes, that was it – she could just stay in the kitchen and make the bean paste. While she was doing that he might be able to get the secret of making it from her. At that age she'd probably get tired and quit soon anyway.

'That's right, customers don't have to see her,' he muttered aloud.

The proprietor, who was talking with a patron at another table, looked over at him. He narrowed his eyes in inquiry at Sentaro. Sentaro shrugged and lifted his sake bottle in reply.

'Another one,' he said.

4

A few days later, Sentaro looked up from the griddle to see the elderly lady in the white hat standing under the cherry tree again. She was looking at him with a smile.

‘Hello.’ Sentaro spoke first.

Tokue’s smile widened to reveal her teeth. She walked towards him with swaying, clumsy steps.

‘The petals have all fallen now, haven’t they?’

‘Yes, sure have.’ Sentaro looked up at the tree too.

‘Now is a good time for leaf-viewing.’

‘Leaf-viewing?’

‘Yes, when the leaves are at their best. Look, up there.’

Sentaro looked in the direction Tokue pointed and saw buds of new foliage in the swaying treetops.

‘See, they’re waving their hands at you.’

When you put it like that, there was some resemblance, he thought. The overlapping leaves moving to and fro did look a bit like children holding hands and swinging them. He mumbled something in agreement and turned to Tokue again.

‘Um, I want to say...’

‘Yes?’

‘That bean paste you gave me was delicious.’

‘Ah, so you tried it.’

‘Yes. And I wondered if you’d like to come and help out here.’

Tokue looked puzzled. ‘What?’

‘Could you make that bean paste for me here?’

Tokue looked at Sentaro with her mouth hanging half-open. ‘Yes...Really?’

‘Only make the bean paste, mind you. I don’t need help with customers.’

‘Oh?’

An awkward silence ensued as Tokue continued staring at Sentaro. He beckoned for her to come in and take a seat at the inside counter. She entered, sat down on a chair, and took off her hat. Her scalp was visible under white hair.

‘Can you manage lifting the cooking pans? They’re quite heavy. You need to be strong to make bean paste.’

‘You could lift the pans for me.’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ said Sentaro distractedly, looking at Tokue’s hands. She had them clasped in such a way as to hide the gnarled fingers. ‘Can you hold a wooden spoon all right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Excuse me for asking, but what happened to your hands?’

‘Ah, my hands.’

Sentaro noticed they were tightly gripped.

‘I had an illness when I was young and this is a side-effect. I know they don’t look so good but I don’t think it’ll be a problem.’

‘Well, that’s why all I’m asking is for you to make bean paste. That’s enough.’

‘But I really can work here, can’t I?’ Tokue looked at him and smiled. The movement caused the skin on her right cheek to stretch taut, as if there was a hard board concealed underneath. Sentaro wondered if that was what made her eyes appear to be different shapes.

‘Yes, you can. What should I call you? Mrs... Miss...’

‘Tokue is fine. And what’s your name, young man?’

‘Sentaro Tsujii.’

‘Sentaro Tsujii? What a lovely name. It sounds like an actor.’

‘Hah, I don’t think so. It’s just me...’

At Tokue’s request Sentaro wrote down the characters for his name on a scrap of paper.

‘And what should I call you?’

‘Sentaro will do.’

‘In that case, Sentaro. Do you make the bean paste here?’

‘Err...well—’ Sentaro was suddenly stuck for words. He didn’t know what to say. ‘Ah, to tell the truth, it doesn’t turn out even when I do make it myself. Sometimes it smells burnt.’

‘Hmm, yes I see,’ said Tokue, eyeing the pots and cooker with an expression that said she could well understand why.

Sentaro stood up to serve tea, blocking her gaze at the same time.

‘Where’ve you been making it for fifty years? At a confectioner’s shop?’

‘I, err...’

‘At home?’

Sentaro didn’t really care where she made it. He didn’t care who she was, either. All that concerned him was if she could make a good-quality, sweet bean paste to draw in the customers and help get him away from this shop as soon as possible.

‘Oh, a lot of things happened—it’s a long story,’ she said.

It was clear to Sentaro that Tokue was not being entirely straight with him, but then he didn’t want to be quizzed about his own past, either. ‘Really, well, I suppose so,’ he replied.

‘Do you own this shop, Sentaro?’

‘No, it’s more like the extension of a casual job.’

‘So there’s someone else. The owner?’

‘My former boss used to run the shop and work here. Now his wife owns it.’

‘So you’re not really responsible.’

‘Not exactly that either.’

‘Should I introduce myself to her?’

‘She’s not in good health at the moment and sometimes can’t even come by once a week. Another time.’

Sentaro thought he detected an expression of relief pass over Tokue’s face when she heard that.

‘What about your boss?’

‘He passed away.’

‘Oh, I see.’

Sentaro took advantage of the pause in conversation to push a notebook and pen over to Tokue. ‘Okay, lady— err...Tokue, can you write your full name and contact details for me, please?’

Tokue looked at the paper with a strained expression. 'My fingers...' she said hesitatingly.

Here we go already, Sentaro thought, wanting to look the other way. But after a brief interval Tokue picked up the pen and wrote her name, carefully forming each character stroke by stroke, in the same quirky, distinctive handwriting that Sentaro had previously seen. It took some time for her to complete the task. The writing made a bold impression, penned with such force it left imprints several pages deep.

'What about a phone number? For emergency contact. Don't you have a mobile phone?'

'I don't have a telephone. The post will do.'

'That's not what I meant...'

'It's all right. I won't be late. I'm up before the birds.'

'But it's not...'

Looking at the address, Sentaro saw she had written the name of a district that was on the outskirts of the city. He had an odd feeling it should mean something to him, but couldn't say why.

5

The second hand moved around the clock.

Sentaro lay with his hands on the quilt, staring up at the dark ceiling. The whisky he'd drunk as a nightcap had not helped him fall asleep.

He twisted his head to reach out for the clock next to the pillow and brushed the alarm button with his fingers to check that it was set. Tokue Yoshii was going to come once every two days to make coarse sweet bean paste for him, starting tomorrow morning. He couldn't very well be late. That's why he'd gone to bed earlier than usual.

Who was that old lady?

Even though he'd made it clear she was coming only to make bean paste, Sentaro still felt uneasy. Tokue sometimes said things that seemed off the mark. Although her deafness could account for it, Sentaro did not think that was the reason. It was not as if she didn't have her wits about her, and although she smiled mildly enough, he had observed a determined gleam in the back of her eyes. Not to mention the challenging looks she threw him at times.

After Tokue had written her address Sentaro had revealed how the shop was run. He told her about always buying wholesale bean paste and only beginning preparations two hours before opening.

'Why?' she had asked loudly. 'If you want to use freshly made bean paste you need to start before the sun is up.'

'But I can get bean paste brought here with just one phone call.'

'What are you saying?! Bean paste is the soul of dorayaki, boss!'

'Yeah...that's why I asked you to work here.'

'If you were a customer, would you line up for dorayaki from this shop?'

'Now, look here...well, maybe not.'

She had given him quite a talking-to. He might be the one in charge, but he could hardly answer back. In the end he agreed to comply with her instructions: they were to begin preparing at six in the morning. Sentaro was to be in the kitchen before then to start boiling the adzuki beans, and Tokue would catch the first bus in order to arrive soon after. He sighed at the thought; this was turning out to be a hassle.

Sentaro was in his fourth year at Doraharu. He worked hard, with no regular day off, but never once had he risen that early to get to work.

Why had he taken the old lady on, he wondered ruefully. Had he made a bad decision? This was not what he expected. She was more demanding than first impressions suggested.

'What've I done...?' He was fed up before they'd even started.

There was also another reason for his sighs. How was he going to tell the shop owner? That was going to be a problem.

The owner was the wife of Sentaro's former boss, and since the death of her husband she had developed all kinds of health problems. She did not care to eat dorayaki any more because of the sugar content. Whenever she came to check the books or for some other reason her expression

was unfriendly, and though she had always been slightly neurotic, now she was fussier than ever about hygiene. Sentaro had been scolded any number of times about his cleaning methods.

Once he had taken on a student part-time without consulting her. She had been continually sarcastic about the boy, but when someone reported to her that he was smoking behind the shop, she became livid. Sentaro had received a phone call from her, of course. She'd immediately begun haranguing him about what would happen if the shop started to smell. Next time he wanted to hire somebody, she warned, she would have to be present at the interview.

Maybe he should keep quiet about Tokue Yoshii for a while. As he tossed and turned, Sentaro decided to do just that. He didn't even know yet whether she could actually work with those crippled fingers of hers.

He rolled onto his back and clicked his tongue in irritation. Now it was the faces of the school girls who hung around his shop that he saw. They always came in a group, occupied the only five seats at the counter, made a lot of noise, and left food scattered about when they left. Just the other day they'd complained about cherry-blossom petals in the dorayaki. Sentaro usually kept the window open, and during cherry-blossom season petals sometimes drifted in, falling into the pancakes as they cooked. Sentaro had apologized when this happened and offered the girl another dorayaki. But that only set the others off. They wouldn't keep quiet about it and teasingly complained about petals in their own dorayaki. Then one got out her phone and started broadcasting to all her friends that there was free dorayaki.

What would those kids say if they saw the old lady's fingers? And what would she say in turn about their outrageous behaviour?

It was all too much, Sentaro thought. He couldn't stop tossing and turning.

'Those monkeys, what were they thinking?... Cherry-blossom petals, my foot.'

Sentaro batted the quilt with his hands, and then reached for the alarm clock once more.

6

In the morning Tokue Yoshii was already waiting beneath the cherry tree when Sentaro arrived, slightly late.

‘There’re some small cherries,’ she said in reply to Sentaro’s apology, pointing to the treetop above her.

‘Did you manage to get a bus?’ he asked, for he was sure there could not be any buses running at this time of day.

‘Oh, never mind about that,’ she said and headed for the back door, dodging the question.

In the kitchen the bowl of adzuki beans that Sentaro had left to soak overnight was waiting on the bench. The beans had swelled to fill the bowl. Every bean sparkled, transforming the atmosphere of the kitchen. Sentaro felt as if he were looking at a living creature rather than food.

‘Mm, lovely,’ said Tokue, bringing her face up close to the bowl.

The adzuki were not from Obihiro or Tamba, or any other area known for quality beans. Average customer-spend at Doraharu put those more expensive adzuki beans out of reach for Sentaro. When he explained that to Tokue, she said that she was happy to try beans from elsewhere. It was a nuisance, but Sentaro contacted a dealer and arranged for a delivery of Canadian beans to start with.

Sentaro had done the calculations. He estimated that they could use two kilograms of raw beans per batch of bean paste. Soaking the beans overnight would more than double their weight, bringing it to a good four kilograms. After boiling they would simmer in a syrup of granulated sugar, with the amount of sugar to be added calculated at 70 per cent of the weight after soaking. That would bring the total weight of the bean paste to just below seven kilograms. Assuming twenty grams of bean paste for each dorayaki, albeit measured by eye, he estimated that they could make between 330 and 340 dorayaki with each batch. This should last for several days at current rates of consumption, since he never got through all of a five-kilogram batch of the readymade bean paste in one day.

‘Before boiling...’ Tokue muttered, carefully examining every bean one by one. ‘Sentaro, did you take a good look at the beans before you put them in to soak?’

‘Look at what?’

‘The beans.’

Sentaro shook his head.

‘I thought so. Not all these beans are suitable.’

Tokue scooped some out with her bent fingers. She picked out several and spread them out on her palm to show Sentaro. The skin was still hard on some, while others had burst or split.

‘You have to check. If they’ve already split it can affect quality. Beans from overseas aren’t always selected carefully.’

Sentaro thought her handling of the beans was odd. The way she brought her face up close to

them, so close it was almost as if she were communicating with them. Even after they had been put into the copper pot to cook, her attitude did not change.

On the occasions when Sentaro had attempted to make bean paste, he always left the beans on the stove to cook until they were soft. Not Tokue, however; her method was completely different.

To begin with, she immediately added more water as soon as the water was about to boil. She did this several times, then drained the beans in a strainer and threw away the cooking water. After that she returned them to the pot to soak in fresh lukewarm water; that would remove the bitterness and astringency, she said. Next she stirred them gently with a wooden spatula, taking care not to squash them while letting them simmer thoroughly over a low heat. At every stage in this process Tokue kept her face so close to the beans it was enveloped in steam. What was she looking at, Sentaro wondered. Was she watching for some kind of change? He moved closer to examine the adzuki through the haze of steam but couldn't see anything significant.

He watched Tokue holding the wooden spoon with her gammy hands as she scrutinized the beans, observing her side-on. Sentaro hoped that she wasn't going to require the same level of enthusiasm from him. Just the thought of it made his spirits sink.

Without quite knowing why, however, Sentaro found himself also drawn to gazing at the beans in the pot. He watched them jiggle about, covered by the water; not a single one lost its shape.

When there was just a little cooking water left in the pot, Tokue turned off the flame and placed a chopping board on top as a lid. This would steam them she told Sentaro. All these steps were completely new to him.

'It's all very complicated,' he blurted out.

'It's just good hospitality,' Tokue countered.

'For the customers?'

'No. The beans.'

'The beans?'

'Because they came all the way from Canada. For us.'

After a few minutes Tokue removed the chopping board. She stared at the adzuki while pouring cold water into the copper pot. They were now at the soaking stage, she told Sentaro. This involved immersing the beans in water, letting them soak for a while, then discarding that water and pouring fresh water in. The process was repeated until the water ran clear. Tokue stared at the beans as she poured. She kept her face up close, stroking them with her fingertips. It looked to Sentaro like she was panning for gold.

'Nobody's ever worked as hard in this shop before.'

'You have to do it properly or else all the trouble you've gone to this far will be wasted.'

Sentaro could only stare at her, his arms folded across his chest.

'I was wondering – why do you look at them like that?'

'Eh?'

'What are you looking for when you put your face so close to the beans?'

'I just do all I can for them.'

'All you can?'

'All right, boss, lift this pot for me, please?'

Sentaro changed places with Tokue and lifted it with both hands. He poured it over the strainer in the sink and the water drained away, revealing the cooked beans.

'Oh...they're beautiful.'

Sentaro leaned over for a closer look. These were a far cry from his own attempts; he had to admit that the skill with which they'd been cooked was obvious. Despite all the simmering, every single bean still looked firm and taut, with no wrinkles. Whenever Sentaro had tried to make bean paste, most of the beans were usually split by this stage, with the starch spilling out from their insides. These beans, on the other hand, simply shone – each one in perfect, sparkling order.

'I didn't know they could cook up like this.' Sentaro gazed admiringly.

Tokue shrugged her shoulders and smiled. 'Cook up? Have you ever really made bean paste before, boss?'

'Ah, well, I tried...but, you know.'

'Well, you'll have to do some study then.'

Sentaro did the rest of the work after that. The next task was to make the syrup for sweetening the raw bean paste. He poured two litres of water into the now empty pot and brought it to the boil. To that he added two and a half kilograms of granulated sugar and dissolved it.

Tokue stood at his side, explaining the vital points.

He continued to stir the syrup slowly, even after the granules of sugar had dissolved, so that it would not boil more than necessary. Next he carefully added the prepared beans, paying close attention to the level of heat. Then it was time to blend the beans and syrup.

'This is crucial,' Tokue told him, 'because it burns easily. So make sure to keep the tip of the wooden spatula against the bottom of the pan as you stir.'

This, too, was new to Sentaro. He did as he was told, while Tokue added salt to the pot. She reeled off a stream of detailed instructions:

'If you burn it now it's ruined.'

'Keep the spatula upright.'

'Make it speedy.'

'Don't rush.'

A surprising amount of sweat poured from Sentaro's brow and the back of his neck as he stood over the hot mixture.

Nevertheless, he realized that Tokue was indeed right. Whenever Sentaro had tried to make bean paste, this was the point at which he always failed. Once blended with the sugar, the bean paste tended to burn easily on the bottom, but if he tried to avoid this by turning the flame low, it took longer and the quality suffered proportionately. In order to make bean paste that had a pleasing texture in the mouth and still looked good to the eye, it was necessary to maintain a certain temperature to reduce the moisture. But to do this without burning, he was discovering, you had to make bold movements with the wooden spatula at the right time.

Sentaro wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his shirt while manipulating the spatula. And then, when he least expected it, 'That's enough now. Turn the gas off,' Tokue instructed.

'But it's still runny.'

'It's just right. Timing's important here.'

'Hang on...This—'

The substance in the copper pot was still too soft to be called bean paste. Sentaro might not be skilled at making sweet bean paste, but he knew what consistency it should be for making dorayaki. If he tried to sandwich this between the pancakes it would just run out the sides. He did as Tokue instructed though, and kept stirring with the spatula after the heat was turned off. As he did so, the runny paste gradually began to take on the right quality. Tokue spread a cloth over the