

Noodles And Impurities

Mizu trod lightly on barely visible yet well-known paths through the woods. On this pleasant summer afternoon, neither too hot nor too humid as it would doubtlessly come to be in the next few weeks, the thickets were bursting with life in hiding. Concealed among leaves proudly showing off the brightest, lushest greens they could muster, unseen birds chirped and sang their tunes close by and in the distance. Occasionally, some small creature scuttled and rustled in the bushes as Mizu stepped past them.

Mizu walked slowly but with purpose. She was in no particular hurry and had no particular aim save for to walk, in the hopes to clear her mind. Her steel wouldn't melt, no matter how hard she tried. Perhaps because of how hard she tried. There had been a feverish frenzy shivering in her hands in her failed attempts, she had to admit. There had been a lack of calm focus and intent. An artist was supposed to give their everything into their art, Swordfather had said. With her thoughts all over the place, how could she do that? So she hoped the walk would clear her head and let her come to the answers she sought.

But there was also the matter of impurity weighing down her thoughts. An impurity in the right place is a strength, Swordfather had said. So, clearly, her restless mind was misplaced. Needless, useless, worthless attachments she had so carelessly picked up on the road haunted her. Ringo's infatuation with her as some great samurai was of his own making. He wouldn't listen. She couldn't be blamed for that. Taigen had thought her a demon ever since they had been children in Kohama village. He had thought her a demon when they first crossed blades too. Now he thought her a demon again. And he had ridden off to Edo. Good riddance.

Attachments lead to suffering, the monks in the market squares and in the streets

and in their temples had preached. Impurities of the spirit, they called them. And they were right, Mizu understood. They were shackles on her wrists and ankles and mind and spirit, pulling and holding back what she needed free and light as a feather and strong as an ox. These pointless attachments had brought her nothing but guilt, shame, rejection, and loneliness. She was well-off alone and on her own. But loneliness pained her. Loneliness only ever found her with others.

These needless attachments brought her nothing but suffering. One more problem to deal with, one more hurdle to strain over on her path. One more, one more, one more. She thought she had learned her lesson a long time ago. Hadn't she learned enough from her mother and husband? Apparently not. Given where she found herself now, it was clear she had learned nothing.

Mizu halted. Her anger was misplaced, she noticed. Blaming others was the wrong path to take. It wasn't their fault.

It was *hers*.

She had grown attached. *She* had let herself become distracted. *She* was the architect of the brewing and bubbling storm that was her mind.

She shook her head, permitting herself a knowing, grim smile in the absence of eyes to witness it.

Oh well, no matter. That was nothing she hadn't dealt with in the past. She's done it before, she could do it again. It was nothing a few days of meditation and exercise couldn't purge from her heart.

And yet a knot at the base of her skull gave her pause. It didn't fit. It didn't make sense.

She *had* picked up these attachments carelessly. Without even trying. Without even desiring.

Stop. That's not true. Searching herself thoroughly, she knew a glimmer of desire shone somewhere in her depths no matter how deep she had buried it or how meticulously she had meditated it away. It was undeniably there.

Was this not also a part of her, then? One she was unable to rid herself of? Was an artist not to give their everything to their art? Was this not part of her everything? Why did giving this lead her to failure? Why was this an impurity of the wrong sort?

Mizu frowned. It didn't fit. It didn't make sense.

Maybe one needn't give everything to their art, then, she pondered. Maybe Sword-father was wrong?

Mizu doubted that.

Maybe she just wasn't an artist, after all. Maybe all she was was a demon, after all. Maybe all that people saw in her *was* the truth, after all.

She clenched her fists. Her shoulder stiffening shot a piercing stroke of pain from the wound the bullet had left on her.

There it was, yet another imperfection causing weakness.

She sighed and released her tension. The rough callouses on her palms shifted into her attention as they turned from being tightly pressed disturbances between the skin inside her fist to grating patches on her palms scratching her loosened fingers. Mizu looked at her hands.

Swinging hammers and shovels had produced callouses in different places than swinging swords did. Little impurities on her palms' skin, marks of her labour. Different callouses for different arts, for different purposes, she reckoned.

Different arts needed different tools.

Different arts needed different artists.

Perhaps they also needed a different Mizu, too.

Perhaps a new Mizu.

Or perhaps an old one. Past Mizu had succeeded where today's Mizu kept failing. But past Mizu was one she thought long dead and buried. Past Mizu had died the

very moment she had watched Mikio ride away, leaving her to fend on her own with the bounty hunters.

“Nothing is born, nothing broken.”

She looked at her hands again. Which was the impurity, she wondered. Was it the callouses, or was it the lack thereof?

Drawn in by the sounds of flowing water, Mizu had made for the riverbed. To her surprise, she found that she wasn't the first one there. A stone's throw downriver, Ringo stood knee-deep in the calm waters. Two shallow hooks tucked into his wristbands, he painstakingly gathered a fishnet and carefully folded it in preparation for the toss to follow.

Mizu recognized the net. It was the gnarly old one Swordfather had stashed away in the shed. He had never made use of it himself but had sometimes let Mizu try her luck with it when the smithing work permitted for some hours of her absence. She used to spend long nights by the fire trying to mend the holes she had torn into it by catching on branches and rocks.

Ringo slowly collected the threads with elaborate twists and turns of his arms and elbows, as if he was crocheting the net with his hooks. Once folded, he threw the net over his shoulder and clumsily waded further downriver, dragging his feet through the mud under his soles and wobbling like a duck on dry land. Mizu followed with silent steps, remaining out of sight. She was curious to see how well Ringo'd fare.

The river was shallow but wide. At its deepest point, it would've just about reached Mizu's waist. The waters, coming together from several springs in the nearby mountains, flowed calmly towards the sea. The mountain streams were ice cold even in summer and usually crystal clear, save for rainy days when mud and dirt the rain washed away would mix into them. That afternoon, however, Ringo replaced the rain's work with his feet, dragging up the muck and silt with each step

he took. The dirt rose like a cloud around his feet and followed him downriver as the water carried it away.

Having waded a few dozen paces, Ringo halted and carefully observed the waters in front of him, absent-mindedly humming some tune Mizu wasn't familiar with. He stood like that for some minutes. Without any shade to cover him from the sun, sweat drops formed on his forehead and temples despite the cold of the stream he stood in, but he didn't look away. He hummed and observed. And then, in one swift motion, he skillfully tossed the net and hurried after it, soon pulling it out with two fish flipping and thrashing violently in it. Ringo made a noise of delight and turned around giddily to stomp back towards the riverbank, where he had left a bucket waiting for him. His hum had turned into a song which ended abruptly once he noticed Mizu standing close by.

"Oh, you're here," he muttered sheepishly. But then he lit up to his usual self. "I'm just catching us some dinner!" He proudly raised his fidgeting catch and grinned.

Mizu nodded slowly. She watched him drop the net onto the floor and kneel down next to it, pulling the hook he had tucked into his right wristband out to replace it with a knife.

"What brings you here?" he asked, keeping busy with getting the knife's handle into his strap.

Mizu approached him so as to not raise her voice. "Nothing in particular," she said coldly.

"Going somewhere?" Ringo looked up at her.

"No."

"Staying, then?"

"No."

"Ah, I see. Being mysterious. And reserved. And alone. As you wish."

Having succeeded in attaching the knife, Ringo turned towards the net and slowly

unfolded it. The fish thrashed and flopped, preventing Ringo from holding them down securely with the hook on his left arm so he could deliver a clean cut. Mizu watched him struggle with it for a while and took pity on the gasping, panicking fish. Their fate was sealed, it was only cruel to prolong it needlessly.

“Can I help with that?” She offered squatting down next to him.

“That’s alright. I can do this alone.”

“I know.”

“Buuuuuuut?” Ringo turned to her.

“I pity the fish. Suffocation is not a pleasant end.”

“That’s true,” he nodded. “But if you hold them, you’ll get the smell all over you. It can be hard to get rid of. A samu-”

Ringo stopped abruptly and looked at her.

“Never mind,” he shook his head. “Can you hold them down for me?”

Mizu grabbed the flailing slippery creatures firmly so Ringo could drive his knife behind their gills with a quick, precise motion. The flailing stopped and Mizu dropped their lifeless bodies into the bucket with the several other fish Ringo had already caught.

“Thanks,” said Ringo, already affixing his other hook back onto his right arm. Once it was stuck firmly to his forearm, he gathered and folded the net again and went back into the river, wobbling as he dragged his feet through the ground.

Having nowhere to go and having arrived nowhere, Mizu decided to stay, at least for a bit. Besides, her ankle had started aching again. It hadn’t fully healed yet either. So she sat down in the nearest tree’s shade and leaned against its bark.

“Who taught you to fish?” she asked.

“My father. He thought it might be useful for his inn. Sometimes, he makes a fish broth, you know.”

Mizu stared at the clouds of dirt arising around Ringo's feet with every step he took.

"Did he also tell you to rile up the ground?"

"He did, yes! He said it digs up all the critters from the ground into the water and the fish eat them. So they get lured towards you and when they're distracted looking for more food and the dust settles, they're mine to catch."

And there it was again. An impurity in the clean waters that lead to results. Mizu had rarely had as much success as Ringo did with the net. Nobody had taught her how to fish, she had to figure it out on her own. So eventually she abandoned the net and replaced it with a knife from the smithy tied to a stick. That method suited her much better.

Yet a properly placed impurity and a bit of guidance lead Ringo to strength and success.

But it also led to death, Mizu noticed. The same impurity that fed the fish with critters and humans with fish meant death to the fish and critters.

So which was it? Boon or doom?

Mizu sighed quietly, while Ringo hummed his tune and observed the waters.

"Say," he spoke up, "if you're not going anywhere, nor staying, are you perhaps lost? It's the only other option I can think of. Because if you are, I can show you the way back if you want."

"I know where we are," said Mizu. "But I may very well be lost."

"Well that doesn't make much sense, does it?" Ringo looked at her. "Are you sure you don't want me to show you the way?"

"I know the way, Ringo."

"Then why do you say you are lost?"

"Why indeed," Mizu wondered.

“Are you being mysterious again? Because from where I’m standing, you just look lost and tired.”

“I came to the woods looking for answers,” said Mizu. “But instead, I found you.”

“How lucky! Company is always good!”

It isn’t, Mizu thought to herself and shifted her back into a more comfortable position.

“So, what answers were you looking for? Maybe I can help.”

“I don’t know. All I found was more questions.”

“You don’t know which answers you’re looking for? That’s a tricky one,” Ringo nodded, donning an overly serious expression. “You know, my father used to say that sometimes, it’s better not to ask and to just do,” he added lightheartedly.

Ringo stared into the distance. “But he also used to say to always ask before I do something stupid or break something. So there’s that, too. Did you break something?”

“My sword, Ringo.”

“Oh, yes, right, I forgot about that.” Ringo lit up as an idea entered his head. “Did you talk to Master Eiji about it? Surely he must know how to mend it. Sometimes,” he rattled on not giving Mizu any time to reply, “it helps to ask for help, you know. I can do a lot with these,” he waved the hooks attached to his forearms, “but there are some things I cannot do alone. But that’s okay. Nobody can do everything by themselves. If everybody could do everything, then nobody would ever buy my noodles! And that would be a shame. Because they *do* like my soba!”

Mizu smiled imperceptibly. “I did talk to Swordfather.”

“And it didn’t help?”

“Not thus far. It only left me with more answers to seek.”

“Bummer.”

Mizu kept silent.

"Well, it doesn't always work, asking for help that is." Ringo waded closer to Mizu, watching the waters. "Like how Master Eiji couldn't tell you how to solve your sword problem. Or how you didn't want to make me your apprentice. Or how my father refuses to add an egg to his broth. I kept telling him that it's good, but he kept refusing," Ringo shook his head.

"Never egg. I never understood that. I used to think he was amazing, you know," Ringo went on. "Back when I was a kid. That he knew everything and everyone. But now, I'm not so sure anymore. No egg, never egg. But it's so good!" he shook his head again. "So, maybe he didn't know everything and everyone. Maybe he wasn't that much unlike me. Unlike I am now, I mean. Not when I was a kid. He knew so much more than me back then. I had no idea."

Mizu silently watched Ringo shift his position in the water again.

"He's still wrong about the egg, though. But maybe he was also always looking for answers and just didn't show it. Figured things out one by one as they came along. You know, I used to think that about you too. That you had all the answers. That you had it all figured out. That you knew what you were doing. And yet, here you are, looking for answers in the woods. I'm not sure how you would find them in the trees and bushes, but I'm sure you had a plan. You always do. Except right now, I guess, so maybe not always. Most of the time, maybe? Or do you? Do you have a plan?"

Mizu closed her eyes. "No. Not yet."

"See, I knew it!" he beamed. "Even you don't have all the answers! Sometimes I wonder whether anybody does. There must be someone, right? A wise man, a monk, a priest, the Shogun? A kami, maybe? Buddha?"

"Can you imagine," Ringo continued after a short pensive pause, "if there was nobody out there with all the answers? Nobody who's got it all figured out? Can you imagine? Wouldn't that be something?"

"Wouldn't that be something," Mizu muttered tiredly.

“Not that it would matter much,” Ringo went on. “Even if there is somebody out there with all the answers, I wouldn’t know who it is. And if I did, there’s no way they’d answer *my* questions. There must be so many more important people with much more important things to do and decisions to make that would come first. And even if I did get to ask a question, I wouldn’t know what to ask. There’s so much I’d want to ask! What would you do? If you had one question, what would you ask?”

“Who the other two white men are, and where I can find them.”

“Of course,” Ringo slapped his forehead. “Of course, you’d ask that. Was that the answer you were looking for in the woods?”

“No.”

“Good. I mean, not good. But good for me. Because that makes sense to me. Because I really can’t imagine how you’d find that answer in the forest. You’d have to tell me if you did. Would you tell me?”

Mizu stared at him until he let his shoulders drop. A moment later, his eyes narrowed.

“If that’s not the answer you were seeking, then even if you got your answer from the man who knows everything, you still wouldn’t have the answer to the one you were seeking, would you. You still wouldn’t have all the answers, would you.”

“No.”

Ringo pondered this fact. “Even you don’t have all the answers,” he mumbled again and looked at Mizu. “I thought I understood before. But I think I understand now. You’re just like everybody else, aren’t you.”

Mizu tilted her head. “They say otherwise,” she replied, pointing at her eyes.

“I know,” Ringo waved his hands at her and grinned.

Mizu nodded.

“Do you think the differences go deeper than that? Because I’m not so sure anymore

that they do.”

“Very often, I do. There’s always been a ‘them’ and a ‘me.’”

“Never an ‘us?’”

“The ‘us’ leads to suffering, or so the monks say. The ‘us’ is attachment.”

“I like my attachments. I’d be helpless without my attachments,” Ringo waved his hooks again. “I don’t want to be helpless. I want to be useful. Besides, don’t these monks tell you to fast and deny yourself food and nourishment because those are attachments too? Surely that can’t be right. Isn’t that suspicious? How can you live without food? Without noodles?!” he gasped.

It was suspicious, Mizu had to agree. Weren’t attachments impurities of the spirit, after all? The challenge must be to place them properly, then.

“I did like your soba,” she smiled imperceptibly.

“See, just like everybody else!” He stared into the distance again. “If food and noodles are attachments, then I like attachments. Can you imagine? A life without attachments? No food, no drink, no nothing? That must be a very boring and empty life. What if everybody lived like that?”

“Then nobody’d buy your noodles, Ringo.”

Covered by the darkness of a moonless night, Mizu trodded through the woods towards the faint candlelight flickering like a beacon. Sutras marked every inch of her skin she could reach by herself. Kneeling by the candle, Ringo was scrubbing one of his cooking utensils. He was too absorbed in his work to hear her approach. Stepping into the light, Mizu spoke up softly.

“Ringo.”

He jolted and turned around in surprise, a gasp escaping him once he spied Mizu covered in writings and merely her coat. It took him just a moment to understand.

He did not know, he did not comprehend, but he understood.

“Do you know the Heart Sutra?” Mizu asked wearily. Her labour and her mind had exhausted her. She had no strength for more to be said than what little sufficed and was necessary. And maybe no more was needed.

Ringo understood. “The body is emptiness, and emptiness is body,” he recited faithfully. “All things are only empty. Nothing is born. Nothing broken.”

“Nothing is born, nothing broken,” Mizu joined in. She took a step closer towards him, raising the brush in her hand. Ringo offered his arm and she tucked the writing tool carefully into his wristband before turning around to reveal her unmarked back.

“There are some things I cannot do alone,” Mizu said.

Ringo knew. Ringo understood. As much as it pained him to let his previous master go for good with words left unspoken, the Mizu before him would buy his soba. So the apprentice swallowed his pride and pain and wrote:

Nothing is born. Nothing broken.