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## The Mr. Gakishimeji Stories

*The following stories are translated versions of a series of essays included in the Tokyo Mushroom Society annual newsletter from 2019 to 2022. Their author is Mr. Gakishimeji, a retiree with a passion for mushroom hunting and mushroom photography. Mr. Gakishimeji organizes mushroom hunts and identification meetups near his home to the west of Tokyo.*

### The Time That Kōtake Almost Killed Me (published Spring 2019)

The weather has been quite unusual for many years now, and it has been affecting mushroom yields as well. In particular, 2018 was a very peculiar year. Many mushrooms which used to pop up every year near my home, like *yamadoritake-modoki*<sup>9</sup> and *tengutake* mushrooms,<sup>10</sup> have barely grown at all recently. And yet, I've heard that some mushrooms like *matsutake* and *kōtake*<sup>11</sup>—which can fetch a pretty penny if sold—have been fruiting more than ever before. (As an aside, I looked up the price of dried *kōtake* online, and it's currently going for 1300 yen for 10 grams!)<sup>12</sup>

Let me tell you about a series of events that transpired at the end of September last year, right after a powerful typhoon had swept through the area where I live. I had a free day with no plans at all, so I was anxious to get out and do some

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<sup>9</sup> *Boletus aestivalis*, the summer cep.

<sup>10</sup> Various species of *Amanita*.

<sup>11</sup> *Sarcodon aspratus*, a fragrant and delicious edible mushroom. Its fertile layer has “teeth” instead of gills.

<sup>12</sup> About \$30 USD per ounce.

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wandering, and perhaps some mushroom hunting somewhere. But as I thought about where to go, I realized all of my recent hunts had been me tagging along with other mushroom hunters, and I had no idea where to go to find mushrooms that might be fruiting now. Maybe Mt. Takao, Okutama, Mt. Fuji... I felt lukewarm about all of the places I could think of.

And that's when it popped into my head that there's a nice, little mountain along the Chūō train line. It's about a kilometer tall, and it's quite an elementary climb so far as trekking is concerned. In the past, I had thought it a bit silly to go all the way out there to hike such a small mountain, so I'd actually never climbed up it. But it was just right for my needs that day, so I decided to make the trek. As I drove towards the trailhead, my mind was filled with fantasies of finding *urabeni-ho-teishimeji*<sup>13</sup> and *mure-ōfuusentak*<sup>14</sup>—which should have been in season right about then.

I reached the trailhead and started up the trail. I didn't see a single other person hiking, perhaps due to it being a weekday, and my having set out relatively late in the morning. Beautiful cedar trees stretched as far as the eye could see, tall enough to block my view of the sky. But many branches had fallen in the recent typhoon, lying so thick on the ground as to hide the trail in places. The curved branches caught at my ankles as I walked, making the climb quite strenuous.

I climbed and climbed, seeing nothing but dense cedars, with no smaller trees or brush in sight. I didn't see a single mushroom. I continued to trod along, lost in my own self-pity, when I came upon a small shrine. Simple and made of stone, this shrine stood out for its immaculateness: in this whole forest, only this area was free of leaves or fallen branches. I couldn't help but think about how much this small shrine must be

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<sup>13</sup> *Entoloma sarcopum*, an edible, pink-gilled mushroom.

<sup>14</sup> *Cortinarius praestans*, the goliath webcap.

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respected and worshiped by the people who climb this mountain. I, too, put my hands together and prayed before setting back onto the winding path up the mountain. When I reached the ridge leading up to the summit, the cedar trees had finally started to thin out, yielding to other trees such as oaks and larches.

I arrived at the summit at noon. To the south I could spy Mt. Fuji, a belt of clouds around its midsection.

Not another soul was on my mountain, and it was completely quiet. I ate the lunch I'd brought with me, and began to walk through the woods around the summit. But it seemed like the recent typhoon had slammed right into the mountainside, making a mess of the topsoil—and making mushroom hunting all but impossible. After much searching, I found two very tired-looking *urabeni-hoteishimeji*, which I picked, and then decided to descend the mountain once more.

I didn't feel like going down the same trail by which I'd come, so I decided to go down and follow the trees along an incline just a ways down from the ridge. After descending quite a bit from the summit, something gray on the ground near one of the trees caught my eye.

Just a rock, I thought, and yet I decided to take a closer look. Getting closer, I saw that it was a cluster of *kōtake*, perhaps a good forty centimeters<sup>15</sup> in diameter. A shiver went down my spine and I felt goosebumps on my arms. I took a better look at my surroundings, and everywhere I looked, all around me,

### **Mushroom Mame-Chishiki**

The majority of Japanese mushroom hunters wear “bear bells” which ring as they walk in order to scare away bears. The efficacy of these bells is disputed, but the threat of bear attacks in the Japanese wilderness is very real.

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<sup>15</sup> About 16 inches.

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there were *kōtake*, large and small, at the bases of the trees along the incline.

I hurriedly set down my backpack, took off my jacket, and, in a trance, began picking. I picked everything that I could see, and before I knew it, I had accumulated two large piles of *kōtake*. Glancing at my watch, I saw that it was close to 2 o'clock. I was sure I could find more mushrooms if I kept looking, but the autumn sun sets early in the mountains. I regained a bit of my composure and decided to call it a day. I tried my best to stuff the collected *kōtake* in my backpack, but the massive amount of mushrooms didn't even come close to fitting inside. I had spent so much effort to get these mushrooms, and I wasn't about to just leave them there! Frustrated, I rummaged through my backpack until I managed to find my trusty cloth tote bag and two large plastic bags. With my backpack, the cloth bag, and the two plastic bags, I somehow managed to make all of the mushrooms fit. It was only once I stood up and began to gather everything that I realized: I only had two hands, and yet I had three bags to carry—not to mention my walking stick. I didn't have enough hands!

I sat down to contemplate my predicament. And what I came up with was this: I could take the towel which I'd been wearing around my neck and tie both of the plastic bags to it. Then I could sling it over my shoulder, carrying one of the bags in front and one behind me. There was no time to waste; the time for worrying about fashion faux pas had passed. I stood. My load easily weighed 20 kilograms.<sup>16</sup> One plastic bag in front of me, another plastic bag and my backpack on my back, a cloth tote bag in one hand, and a walking stick in the other hand. My bizarre appearance quite like that of a smuggler carrying his illicit wares through a black market long ago, I began to hobble down the mountain.

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<sup>16</sup> About 44 pounds.

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After descending a bit down the winding trail, I came to a large deciduous tree, toppled and blocking the path. On my way up, I'd gotten past it with no trouble at all, but with heavy bags on my arms, shoulders, and back, squatting down and crawling under it wasn't so easy. I sat down on the ground and slowly dragged my rear end along the ground until I was past the tree. Just when I thought I was in the clear, I saw a leafy branch right in front of my face. As I dodged to get past it, the branch caught on my glasses, snatching them off of my face and flinging them away! After a brief period of shock, I pulled myself together, set down my bags at the side of the path, and began to look for my glasses beside the fallen tree and in the nearby grass. But I couldn't find the glasses anywhere. I retraced my steps and looked and looked, but they were nowhere to be found. They were expensive bifocals—the lenses alone were over 50,000 yen.<sup>17</sup> Nearly crying from frustration, I searched and searched, but I still couldn't find them, and it kept getting later and later. Discouraged, I gave up, and resigned myself to the fact that I'd effectively traded my glasses for the *kōtake*. I went back to where I'd set down my bags. And wouldn't you know it, my glasses were lying on the ground right next to the mushroom-stuffed plastic bags!

Perplexed as to how they'd gotten all the way over here, I picked up the glasses, and saw that there were now scratches on the lenses, and one of the temple pieces was horribly bent. There was no way I could wear these glasses! And yet, it still bothered me that the branch where I'd lost my glasses and the place where I'd set down the *kōtake* were so far away from each other... With questions still unanswered, I put the glasses into my pocket, feeling better that I'd found them at least, despite their now quite unusable state. I once again shouldered my plastic bags and continued down the mountain.

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<sup>17</sup> About \$400 USD.

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I was still in shock: never in my life, until that time, had I ever found so many rare mushrooms at one time. And so, no matter how heavy the mushrooms were, or how exhausting it was to carry them, the thought of leaving them behind never once crossed my mind. As I descended, the cedar branches felled by the storm grabbed constantly at my legs, and I walked in pain, falling frequently, my ankles covered in bloody scratches, until I was about halfway down the mountain. The relentless cedar branches grabbed at my feet like human hands trying to trip me, and it seemed as if they wanted to keep me from leaving that forest.

Before I knew it, I found myself near to where I'd previously found the small shrine to the mountain gods. I stopped and had a look around. I thought it would be prudent to at least say a word of thanks for the generous haul of mushrooms, but I saw no sign of the shrine anywhere. Maybe I was lost in thought and passed it without noticing? I wondered how much longer it would be until I reached my car. I collected my thoughts and began walking down the mountain again, when suddenly, a loud gust of wind blew over the top of the trees, and at the same time, I could have sworn I heard a voice saying "LEAVE THEM." A chill ran down my body, as if a bucket of water had been poured over my head. I stopped, then tried to walk again, and felt both of my inner thighs seize up in pain, bringing me to a halt. Cramps! Unable to move from the pain, I was lost in thought: maybe I have no choice but to leave these mushrooms behind? Maybe the *kōtake* are trying to kill me?!

I waited until the cramps subsided, and, gingerly, I began to hobble back down the path again, stopping frequently to rest. At long last, I managed to spot the roof of the cabin at the trail-head between the trees. It was after 3 o' clock now, and the light among the trees was beginning to dim as the autumn dusk approached.

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...And in the end, I made it home, and ended up spending several days drying all of the *kōtake* I'd collected. And I enjoyed no small amount of excellent food, thanks to that hunt. But my greed had incurred the mushrooms' wrath, and the pains I endured as retribution were only beginning. But to read the other hair-raising tale, you'll have to wait until the next newsletter...



Dried *kōtake*

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<sup>18</sup> *Suillus grevillei*, an edible and delicious bolete known as the “larch bolete” in English.