

Gnomes and Crones

A common experience at any main line station in the evening rush hour. You're waiting completely knackered in a queue of professional seat-grabbers and for the first time in months your chances of sitting down are fairly high given your position at the front. Train slides in. Everyone waits obediently in line. A split second before the doors open a sharp bump at knee level swings you off balance and in a flash the horde are past and have filled every horizontal inch. Now you know what it means to be croned. No, the guilty part is not that *yakuza* bloke in the purple shirt and reflecting sunglasses who was cracking his knuckles in the queue behind you but the wizened pint-sized cherub-faced obaa-san now rearranging and replacing her umbrella in her shopping bag and settling into the silver seat (as is her right). These frail withered obaasan are incredibly resilient and fleet-footed when the situation demands, with steel elbows and a turn of speed which would leave marathon runners gasping. But if you think town grandmas are tough, you should meet their country cousins, the crones.

Behind every gnome is a crone. The gnomes, as K.T.O. readers may recall (K.T.O. July '87), are harmless rural jack-of-all-trades (certainly masters of none), ones you should avoid at all costs when you want a proper job done, that is unless you've studied how to handle them or there's simply nobody else around. From a distance it's hard to tell a gnome from a crone, in fact there's one ancient living in a farmhouse nearby of unknown gender, to me at least. He/she mistook me for the lad next door at first, which goes to show that foreigners are not always instantly recognisable as such.

Japanese women are generally said to be patient, to endure without complaint, to make life comfortable for those around them while depriving themselves. The truth is they are skilled at making others think of them in this way while actually getting what they want.

Crones have an additional builtin survival factor which is why, due to their considerable numbers in an ageing population, they are a force to be reckoned with.

They range in age from the wrong side of 60 to 90 plus although early crone characteristics are detectable in the 40/50 age brackets. A generation caught between pre-war rural values and present day rapidly changing ones. Born into rural society or wed in as virtually unpaid labour, they have endured economic and physical hardships. But instead of being put out to grass and allowed to fade away into the blissful senility of a second childhood, they are increasingly regarded as a welfare headache. One of the things that kept them going through the years of being everyone's dogsbody was the thought that one day they would have somebody taking orders from them. Alas the new breed of wife that their son marries is not going to be pushed around by anyone, least of all their mother-in-law. Not only do they refuse to dirty their hands around the farm, but they often have jobs with matching incomes which they spend on personalised cars and ski trips. Far from taking orders they dictate how the family is run. When

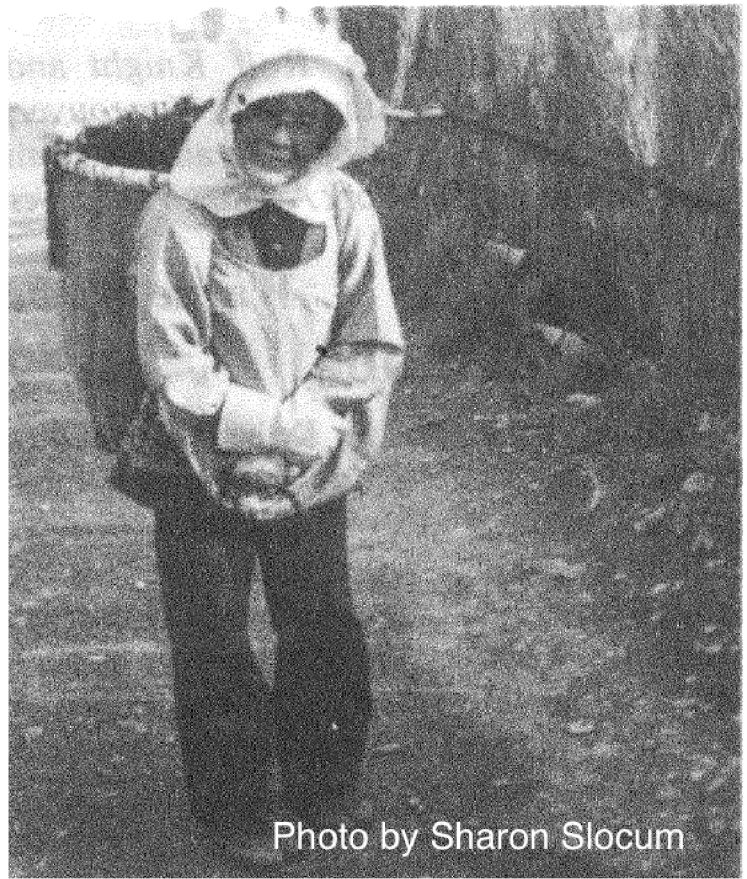


Photo by Sharon Slocum

they have children, it's the crones who must babysit and spend hours at the clinic waiting with a snivelling infant to see the doctor. So the crones have no-one to take it out on except the gnomes.

My former neighbour's household was a typical gnome/crone set-up. The two gnomes were hounded and nagged by the crones, especially the elder one whose voice resembled an unoiled hinge, so much so that the elder gnome was forever wandering off on his own in a demented haze and the younger one lacked the courage to return home until he was completely plastered. His inebriated appearance of course sparked off yet more verbal vibes, but by that time he was beyond caring. Some crones have a knack of disappearing out of sight for months on end and just when you've concluded that they must be dead, they reappear, resurrected as it were. One which keeps a weed-free patch next to mine did just this. There was a funeral, a week of sombre faces and mutterings about poor old grandma passing on, weeds sprouted amongst the vegetables in the field. Then one day there she was, right as rain. Gave me quite a turn. To this day I've never found out who it was that died.

There's nothing like a funeral to draw crones out en masse. However remote their connections with the deceased, they'll be there. Nowadays weddings are stage-managed by big hotels, strictly by invitation only. Funerals are open to all. For crones it's a time to catch up on gossip, to see how much it's all cost i.e. by counting the number of priests and bill-boards lining the road. Religious obligations fill a lot of their time anyway. Doing the temple round (*o-tera mairi*) or graveyard round (*o-haka mairi*) are duties crones take seriously. Others dabble in new religions or quasi-religions bordering on spiritualism. A friend who moved to Nose in search of peace and quiet was disturbed night and day by the drumbeating crone next door, not to mention a lot of funny nocturnal comings and goings.

There's no doubt that it's the crones that make the countryside tick. The fact that they're always around, not always visible but there, means

they younger members of the family can go out leaving them to potter around. Any strangers are instantly collared and questioned, while salesmen are chewed around and sent packing. Without them the year-round supply of vegetables and pickles would dry up as no-one else has time or patience to tend the field. Bitterly cold days huddled over a hibachi, torrid days bent planting rice in a paddy, the labour of humping sacks of chestnuts or bundles of wood from the mountain never make a crone waver. What does eventually finish her off is when the family shunt her into a centrally-heated *rojin* home where she pines away and dies, not of illness, but of boredom.

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