

英語の短編小説

1998年以降、毎年この時期には「Hakumonちゅうおう」に短編小説を出しています。今回の物語はある意味で最初のストーリーに似ています。あのストーリーは、ある男が奥さんと一緒に父親を老人ホームに連れて行くという物語でした。そして、今回の物語は、夫婦が遠い大学に行く息子を飛行場に連れて行ったところから始まります。両方とも淋しさや思い出が出るのが自然だし、どちらも人間の気持ちが中心になっています。

ただし、今回の物語では、気持ちの「変化」も大切なことで、1998年の物語とはかなり違うメッセージがあると思います。

この物語は短くはないけれども、会話が多く割と読みやすいものだと思います。いつもと同じように、読んだあとで何か感想や意見などがありましたら、私のメールアドレス(gwarren@tamacc.chuo-u.ac.jp)までお送り下さい。どうもありがとうございます。



ゲイリー・W・キャンター 経済学部教授

Relatively Speaking

by Gary W. Cantor

As they moved away from the airport, there was complete silence in the car. Jack looked straight ahead as they approached the entrance to the highway, and for the most part Cindy also kept her eyes on the road.

Traffic on the highway wasn't very heavy, and because of that Jack found it relatively easy to ease the car into the right hand lane and then quickly slide over to the left. Once he had the car positioned where he wanted it, he pushed down hard on the accelerator, and after a few seconds they were moving along several miles per hour over the speed limit.

"Slow down," said Cindy. The directive startled Jack, and as he adjusted his speed, the strange, rather distant look on his face softened just a bit.

"What are you thinking about?" Cindy said, asking the obvious.

"Oh, nothing," said Jack. "My mind is just wandering, that's all."

"Well," said Cindy, "don't be so gloomy. We should be happy, not sad. Our son is going to one of the best universities in the country, and he has a full scholarship, too. It's like a dream come true."

Jack glanced over at Cindy and forced a smile. "Yeah, I know," he said. "But still, it's not going to be the same anymore. Everything's going to be different." And as he fixed his eyes on the road once again, he breathed deeply.

"Things change," Cindy said. "Kids grow up and move away, parents grow old... It's all perfectly natural."

"Yeah," Jack said. "I just wish I had a few more years with him, that's all. I just wish he could have gone to a school closer to home."

“He’s doing what he wants to do, Jack. I admire his courage. And I think you should, too.”

“I do,” said Jack. “I do... It’s just that we’ve been so close over the years. You know. So, it’s a little hard to take.”

“I know,” said Cindy. “I know. It’s not easy for me, either. Still, though, I’m happy for him.”

“Yeah,” said Jack. “Me, too. Still...” And with that, he licked his lips before continuing. “Still, the house is going to be awfully quiet now.”

“Yeah,” said Cindy. “It will. But it’s not as if he’s never coming back. He has a long vacation in just a few months. And besides that, there’s the phone, and even e-mail. These days, it’s easy to stay close.”

Jack breathed deeply once again. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s true. But still, it’s not the same. And besides, you know how kids are when they get busy. It’s pretty easy to forget about your parents.” And as he spoke he thought about how he was when he had gone off to college. How did my own parents feel, he wondered.

It was a sunny day, and quite warm, and this gave Cindy an idea.

“Hey Jack, it’s still pretty early,” she said. “Why don’t you call Al and play some tennis? I have to do some shopping and I think it would be good for you to get out and get some exercise. You shouldn’t mope around the house all day.”

“No,” said Jack, rather softly. “I don’t feel like playing tennis.”

“Well, do you want to go shopping with me?”

“No, I think I’ll just take a nap or something.”

“A nap? You never take naps.”

“I know. But I’m a little tired.”

Cindy started to say something in response, but she decided not to. She realized that there was nothing that she could say to alter Jack’s mood. And so, with total quiet once again returning to the car, Jack and Cindy moved steadily closer to their home.

When Jack turned off the highway, both he and Cindy glanced around at all of the familiar sights. They drove past a drug store, a Chinese restaurant, and a bookstore, and it occurred to both of them that all of those places had been there ever since they had moved into the neighborhood fifteen years earlier.

After moving past a few more shops, Jack turned onto a residential street and then drove straight for three blocks. At the end of the third block stood their home, and Jack slowly pulled into the driveway.

“Do you want something to eat?” Cindy asked, as she got out of the car.

“No,” said Jack. “I’ll wait for dinner. Thanks anyway.”

“Okay,” said Cindy. And then she reached into her purse for her keys.

Several seconds later, as the two of them walked into the house, Cindy could hear Jack’s loud sigh.

“Are you okay?” she asked

“Yeah,” said Jack. But she knew exactly how he felt.

“Well,” Jack said, “I’m going to go upstairs for a little while. Maybe I’ll be able to get a little sleep. Are you going shopping right away?”

“In a minute,” came the reply. “I just want to check some things in the kitchen.” And then Cindy walked quickly away.

Jack stood at the bottom of the stairway for about ten seconds, and then, he slowly lumbered

upstairs. When he reached the top step, he quickly glanced at the first door on his left. It was the door to Mark's room and it was closed. Jack thought about opening the door and looking in, but he decided not to. "There's no use making it any worse," he said to himself. And so he walked on by.

A few minutes later, as Jack lay in bed staring at the ceiling, he heard Cindy's voice.

"I'm going now," she yelled. "Are you sure you don't want to go?"

"Yeah," Jack yelled back.

And then, a second later, he heard the front door open and then shut.

Jack closed his eyes. "Okay," he said to himself. "I just need some sleep. That's all." And he tried his best to shut all thoughts out of his mind.

However, try as he might, Jack found it impossible to find the peace that he desired. After a few minutes he turned to his side, and then, after rolling over on his stomach, went back to facing straight up. But it was no use. The problem wasn't the position of his body. The problem was something very deep, and he wondered if he would ever feel right again.

"Ahhhhh!" he finally yelled out in despair. And then, as he rose to his feet he punched the bed with all of his might and grumbled, "Am I always going to feel this way?"

Jack walked slowly out of the room and then, once again, found himself staring at Mark's door. Then, as if moved by some force that he couldn't resist, he moved his right hand over to the knob, opened the door, and walked in.

The room was just as it had always been. There was the bed, the desk, the bookcase, and the dresser with the mirror on it. Jack walked over to the dresser and looked at himself in the mirror. He saw an old man. Then, he walked over to the desk and looked at the two photographs that stood there in their frames. One of the pictures was of Mark in his high school football uniform, and the other was of the three of them: Mark, Cindy, and Jack. That picture had only been taken a year earlier, but to Jack it seemed like it was ancient. I was a lot younger then, he thought. Jack then walked over to the bookcase and opened one of its glass doors. And he stood there for about ten minutes looking over old notebooks, texts, novels, and even report cards. Where did the years go, he thought.

After closing the bookcase, Jack's feet moved sluggishly out of the room. Then, they carried him down the stairs. He looked at the front door and then opened it. Maybe a walk will help, he thought. And so, he opened the door and stepped out into the warm September air.

After he reached the sidewalk, Jack looked left and then right. He didn't know which way to go and so he just stood there. Then, all of a sudden, he heard a sound. He looked across the street and saw his old friend, Bud Green, emerging from his house.

"Hi, Jack," shouted Bud.

"Hi," said Jack. And then he waited as Bud walked swiftly over to him.

When Bud reached Jack, he put a hand on Jack's shoulder, and then patted it two or three times.

"Did you already take Mark to the airport?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Jack.

"Well, you must be awfully proud of him. Just think of it, a full academic scholarship to a school like that. Of course, he's always been a special kid."

"How's Bobby?" asked Jack.

"He's fine. His classes start next week."

"You're lucky to have him at home."

"Well, I guess. He's a good kid. At least he doesn't get into any trouble. But still, he's no superstar like Mark."

Jack laughed a bit uncomfortably.

"You did good," Bud said. "You raised quite a kid."

"I didn't do anything," Jack said, again laughing rather awkwardly. And then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Hey, Jack," Bud said. "I was thinking about going to the golf range to hit a few balls. Do you want to go with me?"

"No, thanks," said Jack. "I'm just going to take a little walk."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, Jack." And then Bud once again patted Jack on the shoulder.

At this point, the two men stood silently, and then, all of a sudden, both of them looked down at the same time.

Bud was the first to look up again, and he broke the silence when he said, "Cheer up, Jack! It's not the end of the world."

"What?" said Jack.

"You know what I mean. Mark is off to bigger and better things. It's the way it should be. You know that. You should be happy."

"That's easy for you to say. Your kid's not going off 3,000 miles to school."

"Well," said Bud, "I know how you feel. But, we all have to let go sometime."

"Yeah, I know, Bud. I know... Thanks, Bud."

"Well," Bud said, "I'm going to go now. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure," said Jack. And he watched as Bud crossed the street and got into his car.

Once again, Jack stood thinking about which way he should go, and then, all of a sudden he started moving. He crossed the street, and then walked along the one block that separated his house from a small park.

Jack had always liked that park, and when Mark was younger they had often gone there together. Sometimes they played catch there with a baseball or a football, and they also often jogged around the perimeter of the park. They used to count how many times they could jog around the park without stopping, and Jack remembered one day when they circled the park 30 times. He had been completely exhausted and thought that he might have a heart attack right then and there.

As he approached the end of the street, Jack heard some yelling and realized that something was going on in the park. He crossed the dirt path that led to the park's entrance, and then, after emerging from the shade of a large tree, he was able to see what was happening. A bunch of kids were playing softball, and the yells accompanied the action of the game.

Jack stood and watched the kids for a while from a distance. They looked to be about twelve or thirteen years old, and they were dressed in all sorts of summer attire. Obviously, it was just a pickup game with a number of kids from the neighborhood.

There was only one bench to sit on in the park, and as Jack looked in the direction of that bench he saw a middle aged man sitting there watching the game. Jack walked toward the man, and then, with the man still looking at the game, said, "Do you mind if I sit down?"

The man looked up quickly and Jack realized that he had startled him.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Oh, no,” the man said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know anyone else was watching.” And then, he scooted over to his right and motioned for Jack to sit down.

Jack sat down, and then, as the man’s attention returned to the game, he looked at him from the side. The man seemed to be totally absorbed in the game, and because of that, for a few minutes Jack refrained from speaking to him. However, he thought that it would be nice to make just a little bit of small talk, so he finally asked him the first question that came to mind.

“Is your son out there?” he asked.

“No,” the man said, and then he immediately turned his attention back to the game.

Jack was a bit puzzled by the man’s behavior. He wasn’t what one would call hostile. However, by the same token, it seemed clear that he didn’t want to talk to anyone, either. He seemed to want to be left alone. So, Jack decided not to force the issue, and just watched the game that was going on in front of them.

For the most part, the kids who were playing weren’t all that good. As Jack watched he saw several errors, and not much in the way of good hitting. However, there was one kid among them who seemed to stand out, and Jack couldn’t stop looking in his direction. He was a graceful athlete, and he also possessed an extremely powerful arm. He was playing center field, and whenever he threw the ball into the infield, it flew as if shot out of the barrel of a rifle. He wasn’t that big, and this made his throws seem all the more amazing.

The boy’s throwing made Jack think of Mark, and as he watched the softball game, his mind wandered to football. Like this kid here, Mark had always been a graceful athlete, but football was the game that he excelled at. Even when he was in junior high school he could throw a football about fifty or sixty yards, and from seventh grade on he had been the starting quarterback on every one of his junior high school and high school football teams. He was so good that two universities offered him athletic scholarships. However, he turned them down. His dream was to become a chemist, and he eventually accepted an academic scholarship from a university with an excellent chemistry department.

Still, Jack had always watched with wonder when he saw Mark throw a football, and now, each time that centerfielder made a throw, he saw one of Mark’s passes whiz before his eyes. Those memories made him smile. But they also deepened his despair. Those days are gone forever, he thought. They’re just part of the past.

When the game finally ended, Jack noticed how late it had gotten. The sun was beginning to set, and Jack was startled when he looked down at his watch and noticed that it was past six o’clock. Then, he remembered the man who had been sitting next to him.

Jack looked over to his right and saw that he was still there. He was looking down at the ground, and he seemed to be in deep thought. Jack wondered if he should say something to him or just get up quietly and leave. Finally, he decided to say goodbye.

“Well, I guess I’m going to get going now,” he said. And with those words, the man lifted his head slowly and looked over at Jack. He nodded and seemed to make an effort to be friendly, but Jack sensed that something was wrong. There were no tears, but everything about the man’s facial expression indicated great emotional pain.

Jack thought for a second. On the one hand, he felt some sympathy for the man. However, on the other hand, he thought that it might be better if he just left. Maybe he wants to be alone,

he thought. And then some other possibilities also occurred to him... Maybe he's crazy... Or even dangerous. However, despite these concerns, Jack finally decided that he couldn't just walk away.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

The man didn't respond. He just turned his head slightly away from Jack and breathed deeply.

"I don't mean to pry," Jack said. "But it looks as if something is bothering you."

Slowly, the man turned back toward Jack, and for about ten seconds just looked deeply into Jack's eyes.

Jack waited and waited, and then finally the man spoke.

"I'm sorry," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I usually don't talk to people about my feelings. Especially not strangers. But, yeah, I guess I'm feeling something right now."

Jack nodded but didn't say anything.

"Something about watching those kids," the man said, "really got to me."

"Yeah?" said Jack.

"Yeah. Watching those kids made me think about my own."

"Oh? How many kids do you have?"

"Two," the man said. "A boy and a girl." Then, after a short pause he added, "But I hardly ever see them."

"I see," Jack said, not knowing what else to say. And then the man explained.

"You see," he said, "I got divorced when my kids were only five and three, and they've lived with my ex-wife ever since. She lives pretty far from here, and so it's pretty tough for me to visit them."

"I see"

"But that's not all," the man said. "My wife got remarried about five years ago, and so now, when I do visit my kids it's really awkward. They get along real well with her new husband, and the last time I went to their house do you know what I heard?"

Jack didn't respond.

"I heard my kids calling him 'dad,' " the man said. "And that really blew me away."

"Yeah, I guess it would," said Jack.

"Anyway," the man said, "sometimes when I see other kids playing, I start thinking about my own and all the things I've missed over the years."

"Yeah," Jack said, and then there was a long interval of silence.

"Well," the man finally said, "I don't want to bore you. And besides, I should probably get going. By the way, my name's Rick. Rick Bell. What's yours?"

"Jack. Jack Browner." And the two men shook hands.

Rick started to get up, and then he said, "Didn't you say you were going, too? We could walk out together."

"Oh," Jack said, "Actually, I've changed my mind. I think I'll stay here for a few more minutes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. See you."

"Goodbye," said Jack.

And he watched as Rick got up and walked slowly out of the park.

When Jack could no longer see Rick, he turned around and looked up at the red sun, which

was now hanging quite low in the sky. It was a beautiful sight, and as he looked at it he thought about this chance encounter. Maybe there was a reason for it, he thought. And in time, his thoughts moved from feelings about a stranger to feelings about his own life. And slowly but surely, a feeling of warmth and peacefulness began to creep into his soul.

When the sun could hardly be seen, Jack finally got up and left the park. Then, he hurried home. When he opened the front door, he was surprised because the house was quite dark. The light in the front hall was on, but all the other lights in the house seemed to be off. What's going on, he thought. He assumed that Cindy was home because her car was out front, so he wondered why almost all of the lights were off.

Jack slowly walked toward the kitchen, and then, when he got there he was shocked to see Cindy sitting there quietly, staring straight ahead.

"Cindy," he said.

Cindy, a bit startled, turned toward Jack and just said "hi."

"Hi," Jack said in return. "Are you okay? Why is the light off?"

"Oh," Cindy said, "I was just sitting and thinking."

Jack turned on the light.

"Have you been crying?" he said.

"Yeah, a few minutes ago," she said.

"Because of Mark?"

"Yeah," Cindy said. "I don't know what happened. I was fine before. But then, while I was shopping, I just started to feel really lonely. Then, when I got home, nobody was here, so I guess I just kind of went to pieces."

"Sorry," Jack said. "I went out for a walk and then spent some time in the park."

"How are *you*?" Cindy asked. "You seemed really depressed before. But you look okay now."

"Yeah," Jack said. "I feel okay." Then, after a slight pause he continued. "Actually something happened and it made me realize how lucky I've been. I mean, how lucky *we've* been."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I met someone in the park. A guy who hardly ever gets to see his own kids, and it really made me appreciate all these years that we've been with Mark day after day. I mean, we saw a baby become a small boy, and then we saw a small boy become a teenager. And then, finally, when he left home today, Mark was a man. It's like something you said before. Change is natural. This was his time to go and we should just be grateful for everything that we've had until now."

"Yeah," Cindy said. "You're right... When you think of it, relatively speaking, we really have had it pretty good."

"Yeah," said Jack. "We have."

And at this point he reached over to Cindy's cheek and wiped away a tear with the back of his hand.

"Thanks," Cindy said.

Jack nodded, and then said, "Thank *you*."

Then, their eyes met and the two of them slowly embraced.