

JAPAN'S RENT-A-FAMILY INDUSTRY

People who are short on relatives can hire a husband, a mother, a grandson. The resulting relationships can be more real than you'd expect.

By Elif Batuman

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The head of one rental-relative company described the service as “human affection expressed through the form of the family.” Illustration by Javier Jaén

Two years ago, Kazushige Nishida, a Tokyo salaryman in his sixties, started renting a part-time wife and daughter. His real wife had recently died. Six months before that, their daughter, who was twenty-two, had left home after an argument and never returned.

“I thought I was a strong person,” Nishida told me, when we met one night in February, at a restaurant near a train station in the suburbs. “But when you end up alone you feel very lonely.” Tall and slightly stooped, Nishida was wearing a suit and a gray tie. He had a deep voice and a gentle, self-deprecating demeanor.

Of course, he said, he still went to work every day, in the sales division of a manufacturing

company, and he had friends with whom he could go out for drinks or play golf. But at night he was completely alone. He thought he would feel better over time. Instead, he felt worse. He tried going to hostess clubs. Talking to the ladies was fun, but at the end of the night you were alone again, feeling stupid for having spent so much money.

Then he remembered a television program he had seen, about a company called Family Romance, one of a number of agencies in Japan that rent out replacement relatives. One client, an elderly woman, had spoken enthusiastically about going shopping with her rental grandchild. “The grandchild was just a rental, but the woman was still really happy,” Nishida recalled.

Nishida contacted Family Romance and placed an order for a wife and a daughter to join him for dinner. On the order form, he noted his daughter’s age, and his wife’s physique: five feet tall and a little plump. The cost was forty thousand yen, about three hundred and seventy dollars. The first meeting took place at a café. The rental daughter was more fashionable than Nishida’s real daughter—he used the English word “sharp”—but the wife immediately impressed him as “an ordinary, generic middle-aged woman.” He added, “Unlike, for example, Ms. Matsumoto”—he nodded toward my interpreter, Chie Matsumoto—“who might look like a career woman.” Chie, a journalist, teacher, and activist, who has spiky salt-and-pepper hair and wears plastic-framed glasses, laughed as she translated this qualification.

The wife asked Nishida for details about how she and the daughter should act. Nishida demonstrated the characteristic toss of the head with which his late wife had rearranged her hair, and his daughter’s playful way of poking him in the ribs. Then the women started acting. The rental wife called him Kazu, just as his real wife had, and tossed her head to shake back her hair. The rental daughter playfully poked him in the ribs. An observer would have taken them for a real family.

Nishida booked a second meeting. This time, the wife and daughter came to his house. The wife cooked *okonomiyaki*, a kind of pancake that Nishida’s late wife had made, while Nishida chatted with the daughter. Then they ate dinner together and watched television.

More family dinners followed, usually at Nishida’s house, though one time they went out for *monjayaki*, another variety of pancake beloved by the late Mrs. Nishida. It hadn’t been a fancy

meal, and Nishida wondered whether he should have taken the women, who were, after all, his guests, to a nicer place. Then again, in real life, the Nishidas hadn't gone to any of those nicer places.

Before another meeting, it occurred to Nishida to send Family Romance a copy of his house key. When he came home from work that night, the lights were on, the house was warm, and a wife and daughter were there to say, "Welcome home."

"That was very nice," Nishida recalled, smiling slightly. He said he didn't miss the women when they left—not with any sense of urgency or longing. But he did think, "It would be nice to spend some time like that with them again."

Nishida said that, although he still calls them by the names of his wife and daughter, and the meetings still take the form of family dinners, the women have, to some extent, stopped acting and "turned into their own selves." The rental wife sometimes "breaks out of the shell of the rental family" enough to complain about her real husband, and Nishida gives her advice. With this loosening of the roles, he realized that he, too, had been acting, playing the part of "a good husband and father," trying not to seem too miserable, telling his daughter how to hold her rice bowl. Now he felt lighter, able for the first time to talk about his real daughter, about how shocked he had been when she announced her decision to move in with a boyfriend he had never met, and how they had argued and broken off contact.

On the subject of the real daughter, the rental daughter had a lot to say: as someone in her early twenties, she could tell that Nishida hadn't spoken correctly, or expressed himself in the right way. He'd made it hard for his daughter to apologize and it was up to him to create an opening. "Your daughter is waiting for you to call her," she told him. To me, this sentence had the eerie ring of something uttered at a séance. Nishida himself seemed uncertain about how and for whom the rental daughter had spoken. "She was acting as a rental daughter, but at the same time she was telling me how she felt as a real daughter," he said. "And yet, if it was a real father-daughter relationship, maybe she wouldn't have spoken this honestly."

Eventually, Nishida called his daughter—something he says he wouldn't have done if the rental substitute hadn't helped him see her point of view. It took a few tries to get through, but they

were eventually able to talk. One day, he came home from work to find fresh flowers for his wife on the family altar, and he understood that his daughter had been at the house while he was gone.

“I’ve been telling her to come home,” he said carefully, folding and refolding a hand towel that the waitress had brought him. “I’m hoping to meet her again soon.”

Yūichi Ishii, the founder of Family Romance, told me that he and his “cast” actively strategize in order to engineer outcomes like Nishida’s, in which the rental family makes itself redundant in the client’s life. His goal, he said, is “to bring about a society where no one needs our service.” A handsome man in his mid-thirties, he came to one of our meetings straight from a TV interview, wearing a pin-striped suit and matching cufflinks and tie pin that featured a blue cameo with a horse. His business card has a cartoon of his face on it, and a slogan that translates as “More pleasure than the pleasure reality can provide.”

Born in Tokyo, Ishii grew up on the Chiba coast, where his father was a fruit dealer and his mother taught swimming. When he was in elementary school, his friends would gather around a pay phone to listen to him make prank calls, disguising his voice as a grownup’s; only he could make such calls without laughing. At twenty, he was scouted by a talent agency, and got a few jobs as a model and a movie extra. He also had regular work as a caregiver for the elderly. He showed me pictures on his phone of his younger self at different senior-home festivities, dressed variously as Marilyn Manson or in drag, surrounded by delighted residents. He loved the feeling of helping people, and was proud of being the most requested caregiver, even when residents were transferred to different facilities. In effect, he was already a rental grandson.

Eleven years ago, a friend of Ishii’s, a single mother, told him that she was having trouble getting her daughter into a competitive kindergarten, because schools favored children whose parents were married. Ishii volunteered to impersonate the child’s father at a school interview. The interview was not a success—the daughter wasn’t used to him and their interaction was stilted—but it filled him with the desire to do better, and to “correct injustice” by helping other women in his friend’s situation. Looking around to see whether anyone had thought to start a professional service of this kind, he came across the Web site of a rental-relative agency called

Hagemashi-tai.

Hagemashi-tai, which can be translated as “I want to cheer you up,” was started in 2006 by Ryūichi Ichinokawa, a middle-aged former salaryman with a wife and two sons. Five years earlier, Ichinokawa had been deeply shaken by news of a stabbing at a private elementary school in a suburb of Osaka, in which eight children around his sons’ age were killed. Such incidents are rare in Japan, and schools weren’t equipped with appropriate counselling services, so Ichinokawa enrolled in a psychology course, hoping to become a school counsellor. Instead, he ended up launching a Web site that offered counselling by e-mail. From there, he branched out into renting relatives. A lot of problems, it seemed, were caused by some missing person, and often the simplest solution was to find a substitute.

Ishii registered with Hagemashi-tai, but, at twenty-six, he was considered too young for husband and father roles, and his only jobs were as a wedding guest. Weddings are the bread and butter of the rental-relative business, perhaps because traditions that dictate the number of guests haven’t changed to reflect increasing urbanization and migration, shrinking families, and decreased job security. Laid-off grooms rent replacements for co-workers and supervisors. People who changed schools a lot rent childhood friends. The newly affianced, reluctant to trouble one another with family problems, may rent substitutes for parents who are divorced, incarcerated, or mentally ill. One Hagemashi-tai client simply didn’t want to tell his fiancée that his parents were dead, so he rented replacements.

In 2009, Ishii decided to start his own company. The first step was to think up a memorable name. He began researching phrases related to the idea of an imaginary family, and came across “The Family Romance of Neurotics,” an essay by Freud, published in 1909, about children who believe that their parents are impostors, and that their real parents are nobles or royals.

According to Freud, this fantasy is a child’s way of coping with the inevitable, painful experience of disillusionment in his or her parents. If parents never stopped appearing as all-powerful, generous, and infallible, as they do to their small children, nobody would ever become independent; yet how can anyone bear the sudden, irretrievable loss of such beloved beings? The “family romance” allows the child to hold on to the ideal a bit longer, by reassigning it to “new and aristocratic parents”—whose wonderful characteristics, Freud wrote, are always “derived

entirely from real recollections of the actual and humble ones.” In this sense, the child is not “getting rid of” the parents but “exalting” them, and the whole project of replacing the parents with superior versions “is only an expression of the child’s longing for the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women.”

Ishii runs Family Romance alongside a talent agency and a tech consultancy, employing about twenty full-time staff members, seven or eight of whom work exclusively for Family Romance. He maintains a database of some twelve hundred freelance actors. Big one-time jobs, like weddings, account for about seventy per cent of Family Romance’s revenue. The rest comes from personal relationships that may, as in Kazushige Nishida’s case, continue for years.

Ishii told me that, since 2009, he has played the husband to a hundred women. About sixty of those jobs were ongoing. At one point, early in his career, he was in ten families at the same time. It was not a sustainable workload. “You feel like you have someone’s life on your shoulders,” he said. He has since implemented a policy that no actor may play more than five roles at a time.

One of the hazards of the job is client dependency. Ishii says that between thirty and forty per cent of the women in ongoing relationships with rental husbands eventually propose marriage. Male clients have less opportunity to become dependent, because rental wives, for safety reasons, rarely visit men at home; Nishida’s wife and daughter made an exception because there were two of them. In general, rental partners and spouses aren’t supposed to be alone with clients one on one, and physical contact beyond hand-holding is not allowed.

The most difficult dependency situations involve single mothers. “We can’t just push them away and say ‘No, we can’t do that’ in a cold way, because we have a responsibility that we will play that role for a long time,” Ishii said. In such cases, his first step is to reduce the frequency of meetings to once every three months. This approach works with some people, but others insist on more frequent meetings. Occasionally, relationships have to be terminated.

In Tokyo this winter, I met with cast members from both Family Romance and Hagemashi-tai. They had attended weddings, spiritual seminars, job fairs, standup-comedy contests, and the album releases of teen idols. One woman had been impersonating a man's wife for seven years: the real wife had put on weight, so the husband hired the stand-in to go out with him and his friends. The same actress had also replaced overweight mothers at school events; the children of overweight parents may be subject to bullying. Ichinokawa and Ishii told me many more stories. A hostess in a cabaret club hired a client to request her. A blind woman rented a seeing friend to identify the good-looking men at a singles dance. A pregnant woman rented a mother to persuade her boyfriend to acknowledge their child, and a young man rented a father to conciliate the parents of his pregnant lover.

Single women with marriage-obsessed parents often rent fake boyfriends or fiancés. If the parents demand to see the boyfriend again, the woman will typically stall for a while, and then say things didn't work out. But sometimes the parents can't be put off and matters escalate. Ishii says that, two or three times a year, he stages entire fake weddings. The cost is around five million yen (around forty-seven thousand dollars). In some cases, the bride invites real co-workers, friends, and family members. In others, everyone is an actor except the bride and her parents. The rental best man gives a speech, often bringing the rental guests to tears. When Ishii plays the groom, he experiences complicated emotions. A fake wedding, he says, is just as much work to organize as a real one, and he and the client plan together for months. Invariably, Ishii says, "I start to fall for her." When it comes to the kiss, some brides prefer to fake it—they touch cheeks so it looks like they're kissing—but others opt for the real thing. Ishii tries to pretend he's acting in a movie, but often, he says, "I feel like I'm really getting married to this woman."

Of all the services offered by Family Romance, the most perplexing to me was "Rental Scolder." Scolders are hired not, as I had assumed, by clients wishing to berate third parties but by people who "made a mistake" and need help to "atone." One actor, Taishi, a mild-mannered forty-two-year-old fitness instructor, told me about his first such role. The client, a company founder in his late fifties, complained of losing his "forward-looking motivation." He had stopped joining his employees at meetings or for drinks. Instead, delegating his responsibilities to subordinates, he played golf and visited hostess clubs on the company tab. The company's accountant knew

about these charges, so the employees probably knew, too, and this made him feel ashamed.

Taishi, impressed by this level of self-knowledge and reluctant to shout at a company president fifteen years his senior, suggested that the client simply join the workers for a meeting or a drink, and stop charging personal expenses to the company. In response, the man launched into a diatribe about the correct distance between a president and the workers, explaining that any variation would intimidate the staff. He refused to go to even one meeting to see whether or not anyone was intimidated. As they talked in circles, Taishi found himself growing irritated. "I said, 'Well, why did you send us this request if you aren't listening to me?'" Only half-acting, he pounded on the table. "The problem is with your hard head," he declared, and threw the straw from his soft drink across the room.

Rental apologies, the obverse of rental scoldings, can be particularly thorny. Ishii outlined some possible scenarios. If you make a mistake at work, and a disgruntled client or customer demands to see your supervisor, you can hire Ishii to impersonate the supervisor. Ishii, identifying himself as a department head, will then apologize. If the apology isn't accepted, a different actor can be sent to apologize as the division head. If the division head doesn't get results, Ishii dispatches a remorseful president. These situations can get complicated, because the real department heads and presidents aren't aware that they have apologized. Sometimes, if an offended party hasn't actually met the offender, Ishii stands in for the offender, who then pretends to be Ishii's supervisor. Ishii grovels and trembles on the floor while being yelled at, as the real culprit looks on. Ishii says that these scenes give one a surreal, dreamlike, unpleasant feeling.

More stressful still are apologies involving affairs. A deceived husband sometimes demands a personal apology from his wife's lover. Unfaithful wives with uncoöperative lovers may rent substitutes. Ishii's tactic, in these situations, is to apply a temporary tattoo to his neck and dress like a yakuza. He goes to the couple's house, and, when the husband opens the door, he falls to his knees and apologizes profusely. The idea seems to be to defuse potential violence through a combination of surprise, fear, and flattery. If the lover is married, the wronged husband may demand a meeting with both the lover and the lover's wife, hoping to see his rival's marriage destroyed. So lovers whose wives don't know about their affairs end up renting substitute wives. One actress I met described the lover's-wife roles as her worst assignments: in addition to

making her feel guilty and terrible, they tended to run overtime, and the husbands shouted and behaved aggressively.

Another rental agency offers a more specialized service: its name, Ikemeso Takkyūbin, means “handsome men weeping delivery.” Clients choose from a menu of handsome men corresponding to different types, including “little brother,” “tough guy,” “intellectual,” “swordsmen,” “mixed race,” and, puzzlingly, “dentist.” The teenage-looking “dentist,” dwarfed in his picture by a radically foreshortened toothbrush he was holding up to the camera, was, I later learned, a real dentist.

Hiroki Terai, Ikemeso Takkyūbin’s founder, told me that the weeping service is an offshoot of another business venture: “divorce ceremonies,” which are intended to provide closure and relief from social stigma. In the past nine years, he has performed five hundred and thirty ceremonies. (For the four-hundredth ceremony, a husband, dressed as a human-size wedding bouquet, was attached to a bungee cord and pushed off a cliff by his soon-to-be ex-wife.) The ceremonies, which are often held in a dilapidated building, to “symbolize a marriage that’s falling apart,” include a slide show illustrating, with bullet points, where the marriage went wrong. Fifteen couples have got back together after the slide show. On occasion, women who are embarrassed about their divorces have hired rental relatives to attend.

Early on, Terai told me, he was struck by the large number of men who wept at divorce ceremonies—“The women are usually O.K., but the men are bawling,” he said—and by how relieved they looked afterward. Realizing that he himself hadn’t cried in about five years, Terai searched YouTube for tear-inducing videos, and found a Thai life-insurance commercial about a girl who didn’t appreciate the love of her deaf-mute father. Terai cried, and felt that a burden had been lifted.

He coined a phrase, *rui-katsu*—“communal crying”—and started a new business, leading weeping sessions at corporations, in order to boost team spirit. Today, there are some forty organizations holding *rui-katsu* workshops in Japan, most of them unaffiliated with Terai. In addition to ninety-minute corporate sessions, Terai makes a yearly trip to Iwaki, a city in Fukushima Prefecture, to run a *rui-katsu* session with earthquake survivors.

Terai, now thirty-seven, says that attitudes toward men crying have changed since his childhood. As an experiment, he asked younger women what they would think of a man who cried. All of them said that they would think he was sensitive and kind—provided that he was also good-looking. Having also heard from some female *rui-katsu* participants that the service would be improved if a handsome man wiped away their tears, Terai felt professionally obliged to start dispatching handsome men to help people cry.

I had asked to try the service, and selected the “swordsman,” whom Terai took me to meet in a hotel lobby. (My translator, Chie, expressed surprise when I declined to book an eight-thousand-yen private room for my weeping session; I assured her that, though the swordsman was a novelty, it would be neither my first nor, in all likelihood, my last time crying in public.) The swordsman, a willowy youth with chiselled features and an expression of great sensitivity, wore a garment made by a designer specializing in modernistic reinterpretations of traditional Japanese dress. He began our session by reading me a children’s book in which a little boy in Fukushima writes a letter to his grandmother and her dog, who have been washed away in the tsunami.

“Are you crying?” Terai asked. “You have to cry, or he can’t wipe away your tears.” The swordsman, who is also a freelance model, looked solicitously into my face, holding a crisply ironed blue-and-white striped handkerchief. I explained that I had felt close to tears when the grandmother and the dog received the letter in Heaven and it made the dog’s tail wag. “They all cry when the dog wags its tail,” the swordsman said, nodding knowledgeably.

Next, we all watched a YouTube video about a father who played the saxophone at his son’s wedding. I waited in dread for the father to turn out to have cancer. Suddenly, the video was over. Nothing bad had happened. But when I looked up I saw a perfectly formed tear rolling toward the swordsman’s jaw. Chie, too, was crying. Terai explained that, for him, the really tear-inducing moment was when it transpired that the groom’s sisters had secretly prepared a piano accompaniment to the father’s saxophone solo.

All the same, Terai wanted to take pictures of the swordsman drying my tears. “Just try to look sad,” he said. I looked at the floor and the swordsman leaned toward me with the handkerchief. He told me about his audition for the weeping service, which had been recorded by a news

program. To his mortification, he had been unable to cry for the camera: “I had tears in the corner of my eye, but they didn’t overflow.”

“The tear has to roll down the face,” Terai said. But he had given the swordsman another chance. “He couldn’t cry then, but I could imagine his crying face,” he said. “And when I saw him cry I was exactly right.”

My next appointment, with Family Romance, was two hours with a rental mother, in the shopping district of Shibuya. I had been anxious about it even before I got to Japan. The day before my departure, my real mother wrote me a wonderful e-mail, wishing me a good trip and alluding, as I knew she would, to one of our favorite books, “The Makioka Sisters,” a family novel written, in the nineteen-forties, by Junichiro Tanizaki. My mother had given me her copy when I was in middle school, and part of what I had loved about it was how similar the sisters’ shared language and private jokes seemed to our own. Wasn’t it because my mother had shared with me her love of Tanizaki and Kōbō Abe that I had become a writer, and was now able to visit many of the places we had read about together? It struck me as unfair that I was not only going to Japan without her but also plotting to rent a replacement.

One afternoon in Tokyo, on a commuter train, Chie helped me fill out the order form. “There’s a space here for your fond childhood memories,” she said. I found myself telling her about the day when I was three or four and my mother, a young doctor, who worked long hours, came home early and took me out to buy a doll stroller. This unhoped-for happiness was somehow intensified by the unnecessariness, the surplus value, of the doll stroller. “The day we got the stroller,” “the stroller day,” became shorthand for . . . what? For a happy day, though I remember at a later date asking my mother why mentioning it always felt somehow sad. I was worried that she would tell me not to be morbid, not to find ways to be sad about things that were happy. Instead she said, without missing a beat, “Because why wasn’t every day the stroller day?”

I met the rental mother in the café of a department store. I hadn’t seen her picture, so it took some time to identify the right person: a petite, middle-aged Japanese woman, her long hair dyed the color of honey. She stood as I approached.

“Mom!” I exclaimed, beaming.

She returned my embrace, a shade distantly. “So how should we do this?” she asked, speaking in unaccented American English. “Would you like to interview me, or do you want to do the role-playing?”

Having booked her for two hours, I suggested that we might do both. “This is a little bit weird for me, because usually when I play a mother the daughter is in her twenties,” she said, adding that she was fifty-six, which made her only sixteen years older than me.

“Should I pretend to be in my twenties?” I asked.

“No, I can act older,” she said. As our backstory, she proposed that my mother “had moved to Japan for some reason,” and that we would be seeing each other for the first time in years. I agreed.

All of a sudden, her expression softened. “It’s been such a long time since we’ve seen each other.” Her voice, too, was softer, more wistful. I felt a mild jolt of emotion.

“It’s been really long,” I said.

“I don’t know how much you remember. I don’t know if you remember the times we spent together.” The sorrow in her voice made me think of my real mother when she talked about the time after my parents’ divorce, when I lived with my father.

“Of *course* I remember,” I said encouragingly, and even found myself trying to retrieve an actual memory, before I remembered that there were no actual memories, because we had only just met. “I mean . . . not in a very detailed way,” I added.

“Well, I remember every minute we spent together, and I cherish every minute. I only wish there had been more of them,” she said. “I didn’t have as much time to spend with you as I wanted, because of my work. That’s something I regret now.”

I felt a wave of panic, as if a fortune-teller had told me something eerily accurate.

“You had to work so hard,” I said.

“But what about *your* work? How do you cope with all the pressure?” she asked—and the spell

was broken, because my real mother knows all about my work, and wouldn't have asked me that. I found myself telling the rental mother about the meditation app on my phone, and asking if she liked to meditate. "I guess we're talking as ourselves now," she said, echoing my thought.

I started to interview her. Her name was Airi and she had spent most of her childhood in the United States and Canada, because of her father's work as a research physicist. In the seventies, she did some TV acting, playing a "happy Asian kid" in the background of sitcoms. When she was fourteen, her father sent her to Japan, to "go into the system." Censured and ostracized for using English words, she learned to keep her mouth shut until she could speak perfect Japanese. After completing her education, she joined the corporate workforce, climbing to the upper levels of various international companies, before leaving her last position, two years ago.

Airi registered with Family Romance shortly afterward, and now gets a couple of assignments every month. She doesn't have any children or close relatives; she lost her husband, her parents, and a hundred-and-ten-year-old grandmother in a span of twenty years. Sometimes the young women who rent her as a mother talk about "the b.s. they take at work." Listening to their stories, so familiar from her own life, she finds herself able not only to imagine but to momentarily experience how it might have been if she hadn't been too focussed on work to have children.

Despite their different personalities and backgrounds, I heard certain resemblances between Airi's experiences and my mother's. My mother had also overcome many professional barriers to reach a high level in her field, in a country different from the one she grew up in. She, too, had left her work recently. As Airi described the things she liked about her life and the things that could have been better, I felt a strange sense of relief: she had faced some of the same challenges as my mother, and she didn't have a daughter; so it wasn't having a daughter that caused the challenges.

We talked about the article I was interviewing her for. "I guess I'll just be a few lines," she said, and I suddenly started to feel guilty about my rental mother. I felt physical pain when she briefly alluded to her financial uncertainty and said that she couldn't "go on living like this forever," and when she proposed that I hire her as a translator and I had to tell her I already had one. The worst moment was when she mentioned that none of the daughters who'd hired her

had ever asked to see her again, and I realized I wouldn't be seeing her again, either. When she offered to show me around the department store even though our time was up, I found myself saying yes.

Following the Meiji Restoration, in 1868, reformers united Japan under a “restored” emperor, and, after centuries of isolationism and feudal rule, set about turning the country into a modern bureaucratic military power. They drafted a new civil code, making provisions for what Westerners called “the family”—a concept that had no definite legal reality in Japan, and could not be expressed by any single Japanese word. A new word, *kazoku*, was coined, and a “family system” was drawn up, based on a long-standing form of domestic organization: the *ie*, or house. A product, in part, of Confucian principles, the *ie* was rigidly hierarchical. The head controlled all the property, and chose one member of the younger generation to succeed him—usually the eldest son, though sometimes a son-in-law or even an adopted son. Continuity of the house was more important than blood kinship. The other members could either stay in the *ie*, marry into a new one (daughters), or start subsidiary branches (sons). Nationalist ideology of the Meiji era represented Japan as one big family, with the emperor as the head of the main house and every other household as a subsidiary branch. “Familism” became central to the national identity, and was contrasted with the selfish individualism of the West.

After the Second World War, a new constitution, drawn up during the Allied occupation, sought to supplant the *ie* with a Western-style, “democratic” nuclear family. Forced marriages were outlawed, spouses became legal equals, and property was distributed evenly among a couple's children, regardless of gender and birth order. With postwar economic growth and the rise of corporate culture, *ie* households became less common, while apartment-dwelling nuclear households—consisting of a salaryman, a housewife, and their children—proliferated. During the economic boom of the eighties, women increasingly worked outside the home. The birth rate went down, while the divorce rate and the number of single-person households went up. So did life expectancy, and the proportion of older people.

That's when the first wave of rental families appeared. In 1989, Satsuki Ōiwa, the president of a Tokyo company that specialized in corporate employee training, began to rent out children and grandchildren to neglected elders—an idea she got from hearing corporate workers fret about

being too busy to visit their parents. Ōiwa's service was widely covered in the press; within a few years, she had dispatched relatives to more than a hundred clients. One couple hired a son to listen to the father's hard-luck stories. Their real son lived with them, but refused to listen to the stories. The couple's real grandson, moreover, was now past infancy, and the grandparents missed touching a baby's skin. The price of a three-hour visit from a rental son and daughter-in-law, in possession of both an infant child and a high tolerance for unhappy stories, was eleven hundred dollars. Other clients included a young couple who rented substitute grandparents for their child, and a bachelor who rented a wife and daughter in order to experience having the kind of nuclear family he'd seen on TV.

The idea of rental relatives took root in the public imagination. Postmodernism was in the air, and, in an age of cultural relativism, rental relativism fit right in. In 1993, Misa Yamamura, a famous writer of detective fiction, published "Murder Incident of the Rental Family," a mystery in which an elderly cancer patient avenges herself on a negligent son by mortgaging the family house and hiring a more attentive rental son, daughter-in-law, and grandson. After she is murdered, two copies of her will are found—one favoring the son, the other the rental relatives—dramatizing the tension between received pieties about filial love and the economic relations that bind parents and children.

Since then, rental relatives have inspired a substantial literary corpus. In Tokyo, I met with the critic Takayuki Tatsumi, who, in the nineties, wrote a survey of the genre. He explained that postmodern and queer novelists had used rental relatives to represent the "virtual family," an idea he traced back to the *ie* of the Meiji period, when adoption of family members was common and biological lineage was subordinated to the integrity of the household. "According to Foucault, everything is constructed, not essentially determined," Tatsumi said. "What matters is the function." I remembered a quote from Satsuki Ōiwa that I had read in a newspaper article about her. "What we provide is not familial affection," she said, "but human affection expressed through the form of the family."

Replacement or rental relatives continue to feature in literature and film, and appeared in three recent Japanese movies I saw on airplanes. In one comedy, "The Stand-In Thief," an orphan with no relatives forms emotional bonds with a series of isolated strangers whom he meets

while breaking into a house; in another, a stepfather pays his stepdaughter's deadbeat dad to spend time with her. The mood of these portrayals seemed to alternate between a kind of euphoria at the alchemy of the marketplace, which transforms strangers into loved ones, and a "Truman Show"-like paranoia that everyone you love is just playing a role.

Both the euphoria and the dread may have their origin in the deregulation of the Japanese labor market in the nineties, and in the attendant erosion of the postwar salaryman life style. Thirty-eight per cent of the workforce is now made up of nonregular workers. (Much Japanese press coverage of rental relatives presents the work as a "side job" that newspaper readers can use to supplement their income.) In 2010, single-person households began to outnumber nuclear families. In Japan, as elsewhere, today's young people have more opportunities for mobility and individual self-expression, but less experience of security, community, and family. Meanwhile, the ranks of the elderly are growing. Tatsumi showed me part of a 2008 movie in which an older woman deliberately lets a young con man scam her, because he reminds her of her dead son. The movie is set partly in a cardboard village for elderly homeless people, which really existed in Tokyo.

Like many aspects of Japanese society, rental relatives are often explained with reference to the binary of *honne* and *tatemae*, or genuine individual feelings and societal expectations.

Authenticity and consistency aren't necessarily valued for their own sake, and the concealment of authentic *honne* behind conventional *tatemae* is often construed as an act of unselfishness and sociability, rather than of deception or hypocrisy. A case in point: the man who hired fake parents for his wedding because his real ones were dead eventually told his wife. It went fine. She said that she understood that his goal was not to deceive her but to avoid trouble at their wedding. She even thanked him for being so considerate.

Still, although it goes without saying that many aspects of the Japanese rental-relative business must be specific to Japan, it is also the case that people throughout human history have been paying strangers to fill roles that their kinsfolk performed for free. Hired mourners existed in ancient Greece, Rome, and China, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and in the early Islamic world; they were denounced by Solon, by St. Paul, and by St. John Chrysostom. They still exist in China, India, and, lately, England, where an Essex-based service, Rent A Mourner, has been

operating since 2013. And what are babysitters, nurses, and cooks if not rental relatives, filling some of the roles traditionally performed by mothers, daughters, and wives?

In fact, the idea that families are defined by “a love that money can’t buy” is relatively recent. In preindustrial times, the basic economic unit was the family, and each new child meant another pair of hands. After industrialization, people started working outside the home for a fixed wage, and each new child meant another mouth to feed. The family became an unconditionally loving sanctuary in a market-governed world.

In 1898, the utopian feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote of “romantic love” and “maternal sacrifice” as ideological constructs: a bait and switch that kept women at home. Young girls were raised to value romance above all else and to cultivate their beauty to attract a husband—then, by an unspoken contract, with no preparation or training, they were expected to turn into full-time, unpaid nurses, educators, and housecleaners, driven by a “mysterious ‘maternal instinct’ ” that automatically kicked in when the time came.

In late-nineteenth-century Japan, the state introduced a “romantic-love ideology,” which defined the “ideal sequence of a woman’s life” in similar terms: “romantic love (courtship),” followed by marriage, childbirth, the awakening of a “nurturing maternal love,” and the triumphant assumption of a desexualized “caretaking role.” So writes the anthropologist Akiko Takeyama, in a recent book about Tokyo host clubs, where women pay a cover charge to drink and chat with personable, attentive men. Some housewives have spent tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars on their hosts, working extra jobs, economizing on groceries, or extorting their husbands. In this way, they experience “romance” for the first time since they became full-time caregivers and housekeepers, and their husbands started calling them “mother.”

In a sense, the idea of a rental partner, parent, or child is perhaps less strange than the idea that childcare and housework should be seen as the manifestations of an unpurchasable romantic love. Patriarchal capitalism has arguably had a vested interest in promoting the latter idea as a human universal: as the Marxist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich pointed out, with women providing free housework and caregiving, capitalists could pay men less. There were other iniquities, too. As Gilman observed, when caregiving becomes the exclusive, unpaid purview of wives and mothers, then people without families don’t have access to it: “only married people

and their immediate relatives have any right to live in comfort and health.” Her solution was that the unpaid work incumbent on every individual housewife—nursery education, household-work management, food preparation, and so on—should be distributed among paid specialists, of both genders. What often happens instead is that these tasks, rather than becoming respected, well-paid professions, are foisted piecemeal onto socioeconomically disadvantaged women, freeing their more privileged peers to pursue careers.

When Yūichi Ishii talks about “correcting injustice,” he seems to mean much the same thing as Charlotte Perkins Gilman. “Every human being needs a home,—bachelor, husband, or widower, girl, wife, or widow,” Gilman wrote. Thanks to Family Romance, someone like Kazushige Nishida, who loses his family, can rent a wife and a daughter, and, thereby, the comforts of home: varied pancakes, women’s voices saying “Welcome,” the occasional filial poke in the ribs.

Nine years ago, Reiko, a dental hygienist in her early thirties, contacted Family Romance to rent a part-time father for her ten-year-old daughter, Mana, who, like many children of single mothers in Japan, was experiencing bullying at school. Reiko was presented with four candidates and chose the one with the kindest voice. The rental father has been visiting regularly ever since. Mana, now nineteen, still hasn’t been told that he isn’t her real father.

Chie and I met Reiko in a crowded tearoom near Tokyo Station. The meeting had been arranged by Ishii, who said he’d be joining us later. Reiko, now forty, was wearing a simple navy sweater, a plaid scarf, and a marvellous aquamarine wool coat that looked like it was in softer focus than the rest of the room.

“This is the first time I’m telling my story,” she said in a low voice, glancing around the room. She explained that she had married Mana’s father, a man named Inaba, at the age of twenty-one, after discovering she was pregnant. He became abusive, and she divorced him shortly after giving birth. To Mana, Reiko said only that she and Mana’s father had had a disagreement long ago, when she was a baby. Mana took this to mean that she was to blame for her father leaving, and nothing Reiko said could change her mind.

At school, Mana was withdrawn, slow to make friends. By the age of ten, she avoided her classmates whenever possible, either spending all day in the school nurse’s office or staying at

home in her room, rarely emerging except when Reiko was at work. When Mana had been avoiding school for three months, Reiko called Family Romance. On the order form—she had brought a copy of the seven-page computer printout to our meeting—she had described the father she wanted for her little girl. No matter what Mana said or did, Reiko had written, he should react with kindness.

When the new “Inaba” first came to visit, Mana was in her room, as usual, and wouldn’t open the door. Inaba finally opened the door a crack. He and Reiko could see Mana sitting on her bed, with the covers pulled over her head. After talking to her from the doorway, Inaba ventured inside, sat on the bed, stroked her arm, and apologized. Chie stopped when she got to that part of the translation, and I saw that her eyes were brimming with tears. After a moment, she got out the words that Inaba had spoken to Mana: “I’m so sorry I didn’t come and meet you.”

Mana emerged from under the covers, but didn’t make eye contact. Inaba, noticing a poster on the wall for the boy band Arashi, told her that he had once been an extra in an Arashi video. That’s when Mana finally looked at him. “How much of what he says is true?” Reiko remembered wondering, from the hallway.

After what felt like hours, Inaba and Mana came downstairs, and they all had an “incredibly awkward lunch.” Reiko cleaned up in the kitchen, leaving Inaba and Mana together. They found the Arashi video on YouTube. Inaba really did seem to be in it, just for a second. At the end of the prearranged four hours, he stood up, and Mana, who had seemed almost cheerful, grew suspicious: “Oh, you’re leaving—so who are you?”

Reiko decided to hire Inaba on a regular basis—about twice a month, for four- or eight-hour stints, at a cost of twenty or forty thousand yen. To afford it, Reiko spent less on food and started buying all her clothes at a flea market. One evening, after three or four months, she came home from work and asked Mana how her day was, and, for the first time in years, Mana answered, telling her what she had been watching on TV. I saw Reiko’s face light up when she talked about the transformation that took place when Mana “finally learned that her father was worried about her,” and “she became a normal, outgoing, happy kid.” Reiko started booking Inaba months in advance, for birthdays, parent-teacher nights, even for day trips to Disneyland or nearby hot springs. To explain why they could never spend a night together, Reiko told Mana

that Inaba had remarried and had a new family.

When I asked Reiko if she planned to tell Mana the truth someday, her eyes filled with tears. “No, I can never tell her,” she said, and then started to laugh. “Sometimes I wish Inaba-san would marry me,” she said, through tears and laughter. “I don’t know if I should say this, but *I’m* also happy when he comes to see us. It’s only a limited time, but I can be very, very happy. Honestly, he’s a very nice man. Maybe you’ll see.”

Reiko, it turned out, had been told that Inaba might join us at the tearoom. When we said that we thought the person who was coming was Ishii, she said that she didn’t know anything about such a person. “I think Inaba-san and Ishii-san might be the same person,” Chie said. Reiko seemed skeptical: she didn’t think Inaba was the president of Family Romance. For a while, we all just sat there, stirring our sweetened yuzu infusions.

Then Ishii was walking toward our table, wearing a dark blazer over a black turtleneck. “Inaba-san!” Reiko exclaimed.

Ishii introduced himself, addressing Reiko politely, with the Japanese formal address. She reacted with playful outrage: usually, they spoke to each other as husband and wife.

Now they sat side by side, across the table from me and Chie, not looking at each other. The understanding had been that after Ishii joined us I could interview them together, but they seemed to be operating on such different premises that, for a moment, it felt impossible to address even one sentence to them both.

“Have you wondered about Inaba-san’s real name, and what he does in the rest of his life?” I asked Reiko finally.

She said that she hadn’t, and she didn’t wonder now; she felt like she already knew. “I think he doesn’t change,” she said. “He’s very natural. Now I see him like this and it’s the same.” Ishii smilingly protested, reminding her that today she was his client, not his wife.

“You have something here,” Reiko said, pointing to the corner of her mouth, and he reflexively turned toward a mirror and wiped his mouth. It was the first of several moments when he seemed to visibly toggle between Ishii and Inaba.

Reiko and Ishii began reminiscing about their first lunch together with Mana. Reiko had prepared way too much food—fried prawns, roast beef, corn soup, all things that Mana liked—and Ishii recalled that he had decided to try to “eat like a father,” which, to him, meant “with no hesitation or concerns.” To demonstrate, he leaned over the table, stuck out an elbow, and made a shovelling motion. The effect was patriarchal. Reiko laughed with delight. Her eyes met mine, and I beamed back at her. I wasn’t faking—it was a real smile. But what was I smiling at?

I asked about the relationship between a real family and a rental one. Ishii replied that, although a rental family wasn’t real, it could in some sense be “more than a family.” This notion struck me as somewhat abstruse, but Reiko said she understood perfectly. “If I hadn’t gotten a divorce and was still married, I don’t think that I would be laughing like this, or that I would be feeling this happy,” she said. “It’s not necessarily the case that the real family is the best thing that happens.”

Eventually, she got up to leave. As she put on her aquamarine coat, she said she felt very refreshed. Her face looked radiant, more mobile and alive than when we had met. Watching her go gave me a painful feeling. I could feel how much she loved him—his square shoulders in the dark blazer.

Ishii excused himself to go to the bathroom, and Chie and I wondered aloud why Ishii had chosen to reveal his true identity to Reiko in our presence. Maybe he had needed outsiders to give credence to what he was trying to tell her: that he was running a big, ambitious, significant business, that their relationship wasn’t real, that they were never going to be married. When he returned to the table, I asked whether he had told Reiko that he thought they should stop Inaba’s visits.

He said that he had. Mana would soon be twenty. “If Mana got married and had kids, I would have grandchildren,” he said. Grandchildren were wonderful, of course, but they would unavoidably represent more people in the world that one had to lie to—not to mention Mana’s husband and in-laws. “Before that point, I tell Reiko, she needs to tell her.”

“Do you think Reiko will agree?” I asked.

Ishii hesitated, and said, “Reiko probably has a very strong feeling that she wants to continue.”

He said he honestly thought that Mana would understand if they told her the truth. I wondered if there was a way to make Mana see this as a story about a mother who adored her, and a sort of limited guy who, in his own limited way, had shown her kindness and stability. Sure, he charged fifty dollars an hour, but the world was full of people who were incapable of being kind and present no matter how much you paid them. Was kindness invalidated just because money changed hands?

“I’ve been asked why I don’t get married,” Ishii said. Even though he’s single, he has met scores of fiancées’ parents, kissed a dozen brides, apologized for cheating, even attended a childbirth. He’s sat through private-school interviews and parent-teacher meetings, video-recorded sports festivals and graduations, spent days at Disneyland. If he ever becomes a father, how will his feelings toward his own children be different from what he felt on the job? “I’m worried now that I might just end up *acting* a good father,” he said.

Sometimes he has dreams about Mana, in which he tells her that he isn’t her real father. “It’s a dream, so she accepts it,” he said. “She accepts the truth, but then she says, ‘Even then, you’re still my dad.’”

“Do you believe that there’s a sense in which you *are* her father?” I asked.

Ishii closed his eyes, looking tired. “It proves a possibility that—even if we’re not a real family, even if it’s a rental family—the way we interact with each other makes this a form of a family.”

One evening, back at my hotel, feeling jet-lagged and confused by all the stories I had been hearing, I decided to splurge on an in-room massage. Unlike the sessions with the weeping swordsman and the rental mother, a massage wouldn’t count as a work expense. On the other hand, I reasoned, I had missed a shrink appointment back in New York, which cost more than the massage, so I was really saving money.

Two hours later, a smiling young woman knocked on the door, waited to be asked inside, took off her shoes, and gave me a form to sign. The form said that I agreed not to demand a sexual massage, and that if I was a man I would keep the hotel-room door ajar. Everything contributed to the dreamlike atmosphere: her soft voice and sure touch, the fact that I was lying on the bed,

and the compactness of Tokyo hotel rooms, which meant that she periodically had to move things around to make enough room to stand. At some point, I realized that she was kneeling next to me on the bed. How strange that it was somehow O.K. for us to be in bed like this together. “Your shoulders are so hard!” she said, somehow releasing the muscles with her fingers. I felt full of love and gratitude, and thought about how the fact that I was paying her, which could have felt uncomfortable, was instead a source of joy and relief, because it meant that I didn’t have to think about anything at all. I could just relax. It felt like unconditional love—the kind you don’t get, or ask for, from people in your life, because they have needs, too, and you always have to take turns. I didn’t have to give *her* a massage or listen to her problems, because I had given her money, with which she could do anything she wanted: pay bills, buy an aquamarine coat, or even hire someone to give her a massage or listen to her problems. This hour, during which she paid attention to me and I didn’t pay attention to her, wasn’t going to be entered in a ledger where she could accumulate resentment toward me over the years. I didn’t have to feel guilty: that was what I was paying for.

I’d started off assuming that the rental schema somehow undercut the idea of unconditional love. Now I found myself wondering whether it was even possible to get unconditional love without paying. The questions I’d been asking myself about what Ishii really felt for Reiko and her daughter made more sense when I thought about them in these terms. A person can do things professionally—for a set time, in exchange for money and recognition—that she can’t do indefinitely for free. I knew that Ishii had put a lot of preparation into his job, watching family movies to learn how “a kind father” would walk, talk, and eat. Likewise, I had read about a host-club worker who studied romance novels in order to be able to anticipate and fulfill his clients’ every need, and consequently had no time left for a personal life. “Women’s ideal romance entails hard work,” he said, “and that is nearly impossible in the real world.” He said he could never have worked so hard for a real girlfriend.

I thought about my missed shrink appointment, and about a psychology professor I met, Kenji Kameguchi, who has been trying for the past thirty years to popularize family therapy in conflict-averse, stoical Japan, where psychotherapy is still stigmatized. He said that he thought rental relatives were, in an unschooled way, fulfilling some of the functions of group-therapy techniques such as psychodrama, in which patients act out and improvise one another’s past

situations or mental processes. Dramatic reënactments can help people in a way that talking with them can't, because even when we are unable to tell someone what our problem is—because it's too terrible to say, or because we don't have the right words, or because we don't know what it is—we can still act it out with another person. In this light, transference, a key element of Freudian psychotherapy, may be viewed as a process by which the therapist becomes the patient's rental relative—as Freud put it, “the reincarnation of some important figure out of his childhood or past.”

Thinking about transference, I found myself wondering who the masseuse was a substitute for. The swordsman who didn't succeed in making me cry? The psychotherapist whom I hadn't been able to see that week? The parents whose relationship to my childhood self I had presumably hired the therapist to replay? It was, I realized, with a falling sensation, *turtles all the way down*. My next thought was whether it was possible, in Tokyo, to rent a turtle. After the masseuse left, I looked it up. Two clicks later, I was reading about the Yokohama Subtropical Teahouse, where, for the price of a pot of tea, visitors may handle a variety of land turtles. The article was accompanied by a photograph of a leopard tortoise climbing on top of a larger, African spurred tortoise, which it seemed to have mistaken for the world. ♦

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