

Fairy Tale

Yoshi likes *soba* — buckwheat noodles dipped in a cup of cold sauce. I don't care for it. After photographing her a second or two before she started slurping, I put away my camera and dug into a meal more to my liking — *tempura*, lightly battered fried prawns and vegetables. We were having lunch in Amanohashidate, a Sea of Japan coastal village, about as far from Tokyo as one can get and still be on Japan's main island of Honshu. Perhaps it was the beer I was drinking, but I needed to find a toilet, so I got up and found two of them. Now, which one was for men? The door signs said:



Look, I'm no dumbbell. The word for "men" is *Otoko*, and the first sign said "Oto-something." Yes, *Otoko*. This must be it. It



wasn't. I backed out and went into the other one, where a urinal awaited. Then I made Yoshi, my literate better half, take a look. "It's Princess Oto and Taro," she said when she came back. *Ah so desu*. The bell rang within dumbbell me.

Princess Oto and Taro were the main characters in a famous Japanese fairy tale called *Urashima Taro*, and the toilet signs were the equivalents of "Mickey" and "Minnie" at Disneyland. As a Japanese language student about a hundred years ago, I had read the story as written in simplified Japanese phonetics called *hiragana*. Now, the very first chance I got when I returned to cosmopolitan civilization, I purchased the book to reacquaint myself with the story. The book's dust jacket is shown at left. See, young Taro is riding a huge turtle that will take him to the bottom of sea, where he will have a good time with Princess Oto for a couple of days. She gives him a box and warns him never to open it. Taro eventually goes home, back to his village, and finds that many, many years have passed. He opens the box and immediately turns into an old man. It's *Rip Van Winkle* and *Pandora's Box* in a single Japanese fairy tale. No matter where they come from, fairy tales seldom make sense. I thought so as a boy, I think so now.

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