

The Biography of Budori Gusuko

A translation of the first two chapters of Kenji Miyazawa's

『グスコブドリの伝記』

George Wallace

Chapter One - The Forest

Budori Gusuko was born in a large forest in Ihatove. His father, Nadori Gusuko, was a well-known woodcutter, capable of chopping down the tallest tree with so much ease you would think he was putting a baby to sleep.

Budori had a younger sister called Neri and together they would play every day in the forest. They would always keep within earshot of the sound of their father's saw, as he busily worked away at the wood. They would pick raspberries and dunk them in the spring water, and sometimes they would look up into the sky and take turns imitating the call of the turtle doves, who would then often coo back to them in voices heavy with sleep.

When their mother was busy planting barley in the little field in front of their home, the two children would sit upon straw mats laid upon the bare earth, boiling orchid leaves in a tin can. Many birds would come and fly past over their heads as if to say hello.

When it became time for Budori to start going to school, the forest would grow desolate and lonely in the morning. But when he came home from school again at lunchtime, he and Neri would go for walks through the forest, singing as they went, writing the names of the trees onto their trunks with either red clay

or charcoal. On the trunk of a white birch from whose branches hop vines hung down forming a gateway, they wrote "No entry for cuckoos!"

By now Budori was ten years old and Neri seven. For some reason that spring the sun hardly shone at all and even the magnolia tree that would normally sprout white flowers soon after the snows melted, did not bloom. In May the sleet poured down without respite and even come the end of July, there was still no warmth in the air.

The barley planted the year before failed to ripen as did most of the fruit which blossomed only to die back prematurely.

Then at last autumn arrived, but even then the fruit of the chestnut tree were all green and hard. Even the oriza grain, the staple food eaten by everyone, failed to ripen. The scene in the fields and on the land was one of utter hopelessness and desolation.

Budori's parents went again and again, out into the fields to collect firewood. As winter set in, they dragged many large tree trunks down into the town using their sledge, but they always came back disappointed, with only a small amount of wheat to show for all their hard effort. Somehow or other, though, they managed to survive the winter. Spring came and they went out to sow the seed in the fields, the seed they had carefully stored throughout the cold winter months.

Alas that year was as bitter as the one before. When autumn arrived, it brought with it famine and real hardship. There were no children attending school anymore and Budori's parents had totally given up working. Often they would anxiously talk together wondering what to do. They would take it in turns going down into the town, sometimes bringing back a few grains of millet, sometimes coming home empty-handed, their face drawn and weary. By eating the seeds of the oak tree, arrowroot and bracken, even the soft bark of trees, they all managed to see out the winter. But by the time spring came, Budori's parents were already seriously ill.

One day Budori's father sat motionless, his head in his hands, thinking over and over what to do. Suddenly he got up.

"I'm just going out into the woods for a while. I'll see you later," he said, stumbling out of the house as if about to fall. Night fell but still there was no sign of him. The two children asked their mother anxiously, "But where's Daddy?" In reply all she could do was gaze into their eyes.

The next evening when it was already pitch dark in the forest, Budori's mother suddenly stood up and put wood on the fire. Its blaze lit up the house with its glow.

"I'm going out to see what's happened to Daddy. You two stay here. In the cupboard you'll find some scraps of food which you're to eat bit by bit," she said, staggering weakly from the house, out into the forest. The children ran after her crying. She turned round and scolded them.

"Why don't you kids ever listen to what I say!"

Then, as quickly as she could, she stumbled off into the darkness of the forest, disappearing into its depths. The children ran about in distress, tears pouring down their cheeks, at a loss what to do. Able to bear it no longer, they set off into the forest to search for their mother. They came to the spot where the hop vines hung down forming a gateway and where the spring water bubbled up. They wandered about endlessly the whole night, calling out "Mummy Mummy!" Through the gaps in the trees, stars could be seen twinkling brightly. It was as if they were trying to tell the children something. A bird flew past them in the darkness. But there was no sound of a human voice to be heard. At last, giving up all hope, the children returned home exhausted. They collapsed into bed, falling into a deep sound sleep, so deep you would have thought them dead to look at them.

When Budori finally awoke, it was already afternoon. Remembering what their mother had told them, he went over to the cupboard and opened it. Inside he found flour to make noodles, and oak seeds, both in plentiful supply. Budori

gently shook his sister awake and together they ate the flour. Then they lit the hearth as their father had always shown them.

Three weeks or so had gone by when suddenly one day there came a knock at the door.

“Hello? Anyone at home?”

Thinking it was his father returning home, Budori leaped up to greet him but was surprised to see before him a sharp-eyed man with a basket on his back. The man took a round rice cake from his basket and threw it onto the table.

“I’ve come to help the people of this area survive the famine. So eat up, young ’uns!”

The children gawped at the man in utter amazement.

“Eat up, now! Come on, dig in!” He said again. The children timidly began to eat as the man fixed them with his strong gaze.

“You’re good kids, aren’t you? But being good alone won’t help you. Instead, you come along with me. Come to think of it, you, you’re a strong lad. I can’t take both of you with me, so this is what I’ll do. You little girl, if you stay here, there’ll be nothing for you to eat, so why not come with your uncle and we can go off to the town together? I’ll make sure there’ll be food for you to eat every day!”

With that, he suddenly grabbed hold of Neri and pushing her into his basket, he thundered with laughter, “Ho-ho-ho! Ho-ho-ho!”

And then, like the wind, he was gone. With Neri’s sobbing in his ears, Budori ran after them, hot tears coursing down his cheeks.

“Stop, thief! Stop!” But it was already too late. The man had skirted around by the edge of the forest and was now already far away, running over the fields into the distance. All that could be heard was Neri’s weeping but that too grew gradually fainter and fainter until it could be heard no more.

Crying Budori ran after them as far as the edge of the forest until at last worn out by his efforts, he collapsed exhausted.

Chapter Two - The Silk Factory

Budori woke up to hear an unpleasantly monotonous voice right above his head.

“So, you’ve woken up at last, have you? You think the famine’s still here, I suppose. Well, why don’t you get up and come help me instead?”

Looking up Budori saw a man with a brown mushroom-shaped hat on his head and an overcoat on over his shirt. In his hand he was carrying something made of wire.

“Is the famine over then? And what exactly do you want me to help you with, anyway?”

“I want you to help me hang up some nets.”

“You’re going to hang up nets around here?”

“That’s right, boy.”

“What are you going to do with the nets once you’ve hung them up?”

“I’m going to raise silkworm.” Right in front of Budori’s eyes two men were busy placing ladders against the trunks of the chestnut trees. Climbing up, they threw the nets with all their strength, hauling them over the branches. The net and thread were so fine it was virtually impossible to see them.

“Can you really raise silkworms doing that?”

“Yeah, of course you can. You’re a pesky little brat, aren’t you? You ask too many questions for your own good. But don’t you start getting any ideas that this job’s got anything to do with luck, mind you. Do you really think I’d go to all the bother of building a factory in a place like this if I couldn’t raise silkworm here? Of course I wouldn’t. And it’s not only me who’s making money in this business. There’s many out there doing the same.”

“Oh, I see,” Budori said at length, in a hoarse voice.

“And what’s more, see, I’ve bought this here forest lock, stock and barrel. So you can stay here and help me if you want to, but if you don’t, you’d

better pack your bags and get going. The way I see it though, you ain't gonna be getting much in the way of food wherever you end up going."

Budori felt as if he were about to cry but stifling back his tears, he said "Okay, I'll help you. But what's the point of hanging the nets up like that?"

"I'll tell you why. You take one of these . . ." the man said grabbing hold of something that looked a bit like a wire basket, and stretching it out.

"You got it? You pull this out bit by bit and it turns into a ladder."

The man strode over towards a chestnut tree to his right and caught hold of one of its lower branches.

"Right! This is what you do. Climb up into the tree with this here net. Go on, up you go!"

The man handed Budori a strange ball-shaped object which he gingerly accepted. Climbing up the ladder he felt its sharp rungs dig deeply into his hands and feet. The pain was such he felt as if his hands were being torn off, bit by bit.

"Climb up higher! That's it, go on! Now, throw the ball I just gave you. Throw it as hard as you can. I want to see it fly right over the tree, you hear me! Aim to hit the sky! What's the matter with you? You're trembling all over, aren't you, you little coward! Go on, throw the damned thing!"

Urged on against his will, Budori hurled the ball with all his might up into the blue sky. Suddenly the sun seemed to turn black and Budori fell out of the tree, head over heel. Standing directly below the silk-farmer caught him as he fell, putting him safely down back onto the ground. He was quivering with rage.

"You're a right little yellow belly, aren't you? Look at you, all limp and weedy! If I hadn't caught you just then, you would have smashed your head open on the ground. I saved your life and you'd better not forget it! From now on, I'll be expecting you to show me some respect, d'you hear? Right, this time you're going to climb that tree over there, then later on I'll give you something

to eat.”

The man gave Budori another ball of thread. He took the ladder, placed it against the tree, climbed up and threw the ball.

“That’s it! You’re getting the hang of it already, aren’t you! There’s a lot more thread to be thrown yet, so don’t hang about. Any of the chestnut trees will do, so get cracking!”

The man took ten balls of thread from his pocket and gave them to Budori before hurrying away. Budori threw three of the balls but by then he was already exhausted, gasping for breath, his body so full of aches and pains he could not go on any further. “Let’s go home,” he thought to himself. As he walked off in the direction of his old house, he was suddenly taken aback. There was now a red chimney sticking out of its roof and over the doorway there stood a sign which said “Thatove Silk Factory”. A man came out of the house smoking a pipe. It was the man who had shown Budori how to throw nets.

“Grub’s up, young ’un! I’ve brought some food for you. Once you’ve eaten, I want you to get some more work done before it gets dark. You hear me?”

“I’ve had enough. I’m going home.”

“Home? This ain’t your home any more. It’s my silk factory now. This house and all the forest round here, it’s all mine. I bought the lot!”

Budori felt desperate. In silence he devoured the sponge cake the man had given him, and then went and threw ten more balls of thread over the branches of the chestnut trees.

That night Budori slept all huddled up in a corner of the building that had once been his home and was now a silk factory. Together with three or four companions whom Budori had never seen before, the man sat up until late at night, stoking the fire with logs as they drank and chatted. Early the next morning, Budori went out into the forest and resumed the work he had started the day before.

A month passed. All the chestnut trees in the forest were by now covered with nets. The silkworm farmer soon began to start hanging a half dozen planks of wood from the branches of the trees. The planks seemed to be covered with something that looked a bit like millet. Soon the trees came into bloom and the whole forest was turned into a mass of luxuriant green foliage. Small green insects could be seen crawling up the planks that hung from the trees, leaving behind them a thin thread of silk as they went. From now on Budori and all the other workers were made to go and collect firewood, which they piled up into small mounds around the house. By now it was getting difficult to tell the difference between the chestnut blooms and the silkworms, so similar were they in shape and colour. Having climbed up the length of the planks, the insects now began to eat their way through the entire foliage of the trees until not a single leaf was left in the forest. Not long after, the silkworms began to lay their big yellow cocoons in the mesh of the nets.

When the silkworm farmer saw this, he began to act as if he had gone delirious. He yelled at Budori and the other workers, ordering them to collect up all the cocoons and put them in baskets. These were then thrown into cooking pots and boiled furiously. Their thread was then finally spun onto wheels by hand. Day and night the spinning wheels whizzed around, gathering up all the silk thread until at last there was so much, it more than half filled the small house that had once been Budori's home. Large white moths soon began to flap their way out of the cocoons still left outside and the silkworm farmer looked like a demon possessed as he and his four helpers worked flat out gathering in the silk thread.

As the day went on, more and more of the cocoons hatched out and in the end the whole forest looked as if it had been caught up in a blizzard. A few days later a half dozen horse-drawn carriages arrived onto which all the silk was loaded. Then with their precious cargo they headed off back in the direction of the town, taking all the workers with them as they went. When the last car-

riage was about to leave, the silk farmer turned to Budori and with a strange grin on his face, said, "I've left enough food in the house to see you out till next spring. I want you to stay here and look after things for me while I'm gone."

He and the carriage moved off, leaving Budori all by himself, a slightly dazed look on his face. Inside his old home everything was now dirty and in a total mess as if the place had been hit by a storm. He wouldn't have been surprised to hear the whole forest had gone up in smoke causing everyone to flee for their lives in a blind panic — it was that dirty.

The next day as Budori set about tidying everything up, both inside and outside the house, he came across an old cardboard box near where the silk farmer had always used to sit. It was crammed full of about a dozen books which contained all kinds of illustrations about silkworms and machinery. There were some books that Budori couldn't even read they were so difficult but others had pictures of trees and plants.

Budori spent the winter carefully poring over the books he had found, making copies of their illustrations and learning to improve his writing skills.

When spring came, the silk farmer returned, this time bringing with him half a dozen new workers. He was dressed in the most splendid cloth imaginable.