

Spirit Walk

by Juliet Carnell

based on Ranma ½ by Takahashi Rumiko

Kasumi Tendo walked up the path from the front gate with a spring in her step and a smile on her face. She had just spent a splendid afternoon shopping at the market followed by a nice visit with Dr. Toufuu. She had two bags filled with fresh ingredients for tonight's dinner and she was looking forward to a pleasant evening in her beloved kitchen.

Just then her sister, Nabiki, came flying out of the front door pulling on a jacket as she ran.

"Nabiki-chan?" cried a startled Kasumi, "Where are you going?"

"Out to dinner!"

"But I have dinner right here," Kasumi said beseechingly, "it won't take me that long to cook."

"Don't be so sure," said her younger sister as she pushed past her, "Akane's in the kitchen!"

The blood drained from the elder Tendo's face as she contemplated joining Nabiki in her escape, "B-but why?"

"How should I know? She's been in there for hours and I just can't stand the suspense any longer. Let me know who survives when I get back."

Nabiki disappeared out the gate as Kasumi turned reluctantly back towards the house. Nothing good ever came from Akane's cooking attempts and her precious kitchen often suffered the most. With apprehension she stepped into the genkan (1) and out of her street shoes. As she slipped on her house shoes she called out, "I'm home!"

From deep within the bowels of the house she heard Akane's exasperated voice cry out, "Welcome home! I'm in the kitchen!"

Kasumi hurried down the hall, perhaps it was not too late to avert total disaster. It was a vain hope and she knew it even as she pushed her way through the door and laid her eyes on the ruin that had once been her clean kitchen. However, to be fair, it was not as bad as usual. True, every drawer and cupboard had been turned out in her little sister's frantic search for who knows what and there were bits and pieces of food on every exposed surface including the ceiling, but at least the basic structural integrity of the room appeared sound.

And her little sister Akane seemed none too worst for wear. She was standing amid the chaos covered from head to toe with flour to be sure, but there were no obvious signs of bleeding and the inept cook still had a full head of hair.

“Akane-chan, what have you been cooking dear?” ventured Kasumi hesitantly.

“Muffins!” Akane declared with pride, “but I need your advice. How do I know when they’re done?”

Kasumi tried to swallow, but her throat had gone dry. Carefully she sniffed the air for signs of smoke, “Well, if you haven’t been keeping track of the time you can usually tell by looking at them. Would you like me to look at them for you Akane-chan?”

“Would you please big sister?” Akane said imploringly, “These are the best batch I’ve ever made and I don’t want them to become burned or anything.”

Kasumi set down her groceries on the only relatively clean bit of counter she could find and approached the oven the way a bomb sniffing dog would check out a suspicious parcel left at the train station. First she checked the setting on the oven and was surprised to find her sister had selected a reasonable baking temperature for a change. Taking care not to put her face directly in the path of any possible explosive reaction, she carefully opened the oven door and peaked inside.

On the middle rack sat two perfectly normal looking pans of mini-muffins. All had risen nicely and still had a doughy sheen on top. Kasumi guessed they would need about another five minutes to bake all the way through and told her sister so.

“Akane-chan,” said Kasumi as they pulled the pans out five minutes later, “these really do look nice. I think you may be getting the hang of this. Did you make these for Ranma-kun?”

“Thank you!” Akane beamed, “Yes, I was a little rough on him after school yesterday. So I thought I would bake him something to make up for it.”

Kasumi set the hot muffin pans on a cooling rack and began to straighten up the surrounding countertops, “Well if they taste half as good as they look, he should really like them.”

“I hope so,” Akane said enthusiastically, “I went to extra special trouble to get the very best ingredients this morning.”

“Oh?” said Kasumi as she began cleaning off her cutting board, now deeply gouged by her sister’s over zealous attempts to chop something, “did you go shopping this morning?”

“Yes, and some of the things weren’t that easy to find.”

Kasumi picked up the flour covered remains of what appeared to be a mushroom from the counter behind the cutting board. She looked it over carefully after blowing off some of the flour, but still did not recognize the variety. “Akane-chan, did you put mushrooms into the muffins?”

“Uh huh, I figured that since muffins are mushroom shaped they would probably be better that way.”

Kasumi marveled at her sister’s warped ideas about cooking, “Well it is a bit unusual, but I suppose it will taste all right.”

“It should, those were very expensive mushrooms. I bought them from a foreigner down at the market.”

“A foreigner?” Kasumi wrinkled her brow. She had just come from the market and could not remember a foreigner at any of the food stands, “at the market here in Furinkan?”

“Oh yes, he was only there for a little while early this morning and he only had these mushrooms and few spices. He said they had just been imported from the southwestern United States and they were in very limited supply. He guaranteed they were the best that money could buy.”

“Really?” Kasumi said as she dropped the suspicious looking fungus into the waste bin, “Well let’s hope that Ranma-kun enjoys them.”

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The western sky was just beginning to turn orange from the setting sun when Ranma pushed his way through the front gate and staggered up the path to the front door. Ryoga had given him quite a workout this afternoon, but as usual Ranma had eventually gotten the upper hand and sent the pig boy diving into the river where he had oinked his way out of sight.

Ranma looked at his bruised and battered hands. They had taken a beating, but at least they were the hands of a man. Against all odds he had made it through the whole fight and then all the way home without being splashed with water once. “Wish I was this lucky every day.” He grumbled to himself as he entered the genkan and stripped off his slippers. “I’m home!” he called out, but there was no answer back.

As he walked through the quiet house he massaged his sore arm muscles. All he wanted was a quick meal or two and a long soak in a hot bath. The main room was empty so he headed towards the kitchen door. Taped to the door was a note with his name on it. He pulled the note off the door and opened it up. It was in Kasumi’s neat handwriting.

“Ranma-kun,

“Please do not go into the kitchen. I had to mop and wax the floors this afternoon and they may not be dry yet...”

“That Kasumi,” he said as he turned towards the dining table, “Always cleaning somethin’.” He knelt down at the table and noticed a pitcher of ice tea and a basket of little muffins sitting in the middle. As he poured himself a glass of the tea he continued to read the note.

“We have all decided to go out for ramen. I’m sorry that you did not come home in time to join us, but we will be sure to bring something home for you...”

“What a sweetheart,” Ranma said to himself as he picked up one of the little muffins and popped it into his mouth. He was so hungry he didn’t even bother chewing it and just swallowed it whole. It was a little dry so he chased it down with a gulp of tea.

“To tide you over until then, I prepared a box for you...”

Sure enough, sitting at the far end of the table was a large black bento box (2) with a neatly folded red napkin and a pair of chopsticks on top. “Aw, she didn’t have to do that. I could ‘a just filled up on these.” He grabbed another muffin and tossed it in his mouth.

“Oh yes, and Akane baked you some nice muffins...”

Ranma tried desperately to cough up the muffin of doom, but his attempts only resulted in half the muffin getting stuck in his windpipe while the other half dropped into his stomach like a dam buster bomb. In order to ease his coughing fit he was forced to wash the second half down with the rest of his glass of tea. He was pouring another and contemplating the quickest route to the hospital when the phone suddenly rang. He was so startled that he spilled the remainder of the pitcher of ice-cold tea into his lap.

Cold, wet and female, Ranma reached for the phone, “Wha’da ya want?” he shouted in a high soprano voice, “Huh... No Nabiki ain’t here... No I don’t know when she’ll be back... What pictures of Ranma-chan would you be referring to? ... Oh, I’ll be sure to tell her that as soon as she gets home. Trust me! ... Thank you for calling... Jerk!”

Ranma slammed the phone down, “When the hell did she get pictures of me dressed in a black velvet maid’s costume?” A grumble from his stomach reminded Ranma of his more immediate problem. He started to get up and noticed the tea soaked remains of Kasumi’s note plastered to the tabletop.

“P.S. I’ve drawn fresh bath water today, so it should still be nice and hot just the way you like it.”

“I’ll be damned if I’m goin’ to the hospital as a girl!”

Once in the bath Ranma settled down a little. The pains in his stomach didn't seem to be life threatening, at least not yet anyway, and the bath was indeed as hot as he liked it. So hot that the room was filled with delightfully warm steam. As Ranma gently lowered his aching body into the hot water and returned to male form, the inviting warmth seduced him into staying a while longer than necessary.

Ranma often saw himself becoming one of those old men who spend most of their time at the public bath house hogging the hottest pools to themselves and staying in until their skins' looked like cooked lobster shells. The hot water attacked his bruised muscles and stiff joints lulling him into an ever more relaxed state. He breathed deeply of the steamy air and felt himself becoming lightheaded. He would have gotten out of the bath at that point, except that he was already too far gone to move.

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Ranma awoke with the strong aroma of fresh cedar filling his nostrils and the sounds of chirping birds in his ears. He opened his eyes and looked up into a canopy of green leaves pierced through with luminescent strands of liquid sunlight. He sat up and looked around.

He was sitting in a small glade of ancient trees. In the distance he could clearly see Mt. Fuji on the far side of a crystal blue lake. Everything around him seemed alive with color and every sound and smell seemed to explode on his senses. He couldn't remember ever feeling this much alive. Ranma began to worry that he might already be dead.

A rustling noise from the woods behind him caught Ranma's attention and he looked around just in time to see a strange dog emerge from the forest and stroll casually into the glade. The dog was quite large with big erect ears and tan fur that looked a little mangy. There was something disturbing about the animal's eyes and Ranma's battle senses were alerted. He turned himself around to face the animal and rose slowly into a fighting crouch.

The dog just ignored him as it sauntered to within a meter of where Ranma knelt. It sat down on its haunches and as Ranma watched warily, it scratched its ear with a hind paw. Then it faced the tense young man, opened its mouth and said "Welcome warrior. I am Wajunkaga and I will be your spirit guide."

Ranma was surprised, the dog spoke pretty good Japanese except that it used new words in an old dialect. It sounded like an actor in a really bad samurai movie. The fact that it was talking at all didn't really bother him for some reason.

"What kinda dog are you?" Ranma asked as if this were perfectly normal question to be asking a talking dog.

The animal blinked and tilted its head to one side, "I'm not any sort of *dog* young man. I am the spirit of Coyote."

“What’s a coyote?”

The coyote made a choking noise, “What’s a coyote?! What kind of warrior comes to a spirit walk not knowing the Coyote spirit? I am the Great Trickster. I am the father of all peoples. I brought death into this world. My howl fills the night and my many brothers search eternally for the souls of lost warriors. What tribe are you from that you did not learn all this on your father’s knee?”

“Tribe?”

“Yes, tribe!” the coyote was becoming aggravated and rose up on all fours, “Your tribe, your people, where do you come from boy?!” it growled fiercely.

“Furinkan-cho, Nerima ward, Tokyo...” Ranma stuttered, “i-i-in Japan.” he said pointing through the trees at Mt. Fuji in the distance.

“Japan?” said the coyote in surprise, “Japan... You know, back in the sixties I got called out to some pretty strange places, but this is the first time anyone in Japan ever asked for a spirit walk.”

“Um...” Ranma was reluctant to ask the vicious animal his next question.

“Go ahead, ask me what a spirit walk is,” the coyote sighed.

“Okay, what’s a spirit walk?”

“The spirit walk is a visionary quest for your life’s purpose. I am to guide you in finding the true meaning of your life and give you the knowledge you will need to decide your path in the future. Are you telling me that you ate the sacred mushrooms and went to pray in the sweat lodge without knowing this?”

“I just ate some of Akane’s crappy cookin’ and took a bath. Then I ended up here talking to a dog... coyote... spirit thingy. What if I don’t want to go on this spirit walk?”

“Well, you can just stay here and wait it out, but I must warn you that without me to protect you all sorts of nasty things might come looking for you. And here all the martial arts prowess in the world won’t protect you.”

Suddenly there was the sound of soft mewing coming from every direction. Ranma looked around at the darkening forest with some anxiety, “Um... well maybe I *could* take a walk.”

“Good,” said the coyote with a chuckle, “I was beginning to think you had more muscle than brains. Now, tell me what it is that you seek in life?”

“You mean what I’m lookin’ for? That’s easy, I need to find the Spring of Drowned Man, the Nannichuan, and I need to find it quick!”

“Nannichuan...” mused the coyote, “Sounds Chinese, but it’s not in China. You know that it’s a cursed pool that turns whatever falls into it into a man, don’t you? Pardon my mentioning the obvious, but you don’t really need it boy.”

“You should see me after I get splashed with some cold water!” Suddenly a sheet of ice-cold rain appeared out of the clear blue sky and soaked Ranma in an instant.

“Hey, hey,” cried the coyote, “You make a pretty nice looking girl! I wouldn’t mind fathering a few pups with a hot...” seeing Ranma’s expression change, the coyote backed up a step, “Easy boy! Coming from a coyote that’s a great compliment you know.”

“Yeah, well keep it to yourself... um... Hey, what should I call you anyway?”

“I suppose it’s useless to try and get you to say Tonenili or Tezcatlipoca?” Ranma looked completely lost at this, “I thought not, let’s just try Kami-san for the time being, okay?”

“Right! Lead on Kami-san I’m right behind ya.”

“You might want to take this walk as a man,” the coyote said and suddenly there was a shower of hot water falling only on Ranma’s head.

“Hey, that’s a neat trick,” said the now male martial artist, “How’d you do that?”

“Would it mean anything to you if I said you did it yourself,” the coyote asked knowing the answer already. Ranma just shook his head, “Then it was magic.”

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Ranma followed the coyote into the forest. As they walked along, the spirit guide continued to explain that everything he was going to see were only visions of his possible futures. Neither reality nor dreams, they would come to pass only if Ranma made the right choices in life.

“When do we get to the spring?” Ranma asked impatiently.

The coyote sighed, “If I showed it to you now, would you stick around for the rest?”

“Probably not...”

“Then be patient and we’ll save that for last. I have several other things I must show you first.”

They stepped out of the forest and walked up to a large traditional Japanese style building.

“Hey,” cried out Ranma, “This is the Tendo dojo (3). What’s it doin’ out here in the woods?”

“What woods?” asked the coyote with a chuckle.

Ranma turned around expecting to see the ancient cedar forest, but instead stared into the blank concrete wall at the back of the Tendo property. The sounds of city traffic drifted over the wall to replace the bird songs from before.

“I told you this wasn’t reality. Don’t assume anything, just watch and observe. The people in these visions can neither see nor hear you, so don’t waste your breath. Let’s go inside.”

They moved up the steps and entered through the side door. Inside Akane was stacking cinderblocks at one end of the hall. The look on her face was grim.

“Hey, it’s Akane,” Ranma said, “She looks mad. Someone must ’a pissed her off again.”

“Someone?” asked the coyote.

Ranma hung his head, “Probably me. Sometimes I try and kid her, ya know, but she always takes it wrong. Then she acts so uncute about it. Like now, she’s stackin’ up those blocks just so she can smash ‘em. Is that anyway for a girl to act?”

“It is if that girl is a martial artist,” said the coyote, “Maybe this is the only way she was ever taught to release her frustrations.”

“Yeah, well it ain’t cute. That’s for sure.”

As they continued to watch Akane stacking the blocks four tiny figures ran into the room from the door leading back to the house. They swarmed around Akane reaching out to touch her and jumping up and down in delight, but Akane ignored them and continued to stack her blocks. Ranma did a double take when he realized that none of the figures had faces, just blank white globes where their heads should be.

“What are those things? They’re not gonna hurt her, are they?”

The coyote chuckled, “Of course they won’t hurt her, they are the spirits of her unborn children. They have attached themselves to her and will continue to be with her until they are either born or she dies.”

“Why don’t they have faces?”

“That’s because they have not yet chosen their father. Once they do that they will take on the appearance they might have in life, but if Akane doesn’t chose that man to father them they are doomed never to be born.”

Akane took up a fight stance in front of the pile of cinderblocks and the spirit children all backed away from her. She placed her palm gently on the top block and took several calming breaths. Then she drew back her arm and smashed her hand down into the blocks, which crumbled into several large chunks.

When her fist hit the top block, Akane let out a shout of rage that rang in the air like the peeling of a great church bell. It echoed back and forth refusing to dissipate until Ranma forced himself to listen to it... “Ranma no BAKA!”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, I’m new to the Japanese language,” said the amused coyote, “but didn’t she just call you an idiot?”

Ranma glared at his spirit guide, “Yeah, and if that ain’t uncute I don’t know what is!” With that he stormed out of the dojo and into the courtyard between it and the main house followed closely by the coyote.

“It won’t help to get mad at these visions warrior. It hurts you when she calls you that doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, that and ‘jerk’, ‘moron’, ‘pervert’, and about a dozen other things she calls me all the time. Wha’d I ever do to her anyway? It wasn’t my fault I was a girl the first time she met me. It was rainin’ for Pete’s sake.”

“Maybe if you had explained that to her rather than trying to hide it she wouldn’t have been so offended.”

“Yeah, well it’s too late to change all that now. She hates me ‘cause of my curse and she won’t ever let me forget it. But she loves Ryoga with his little pig curse. She hugs him and sleeps with him and calls him cute names.”

“So you think it is your curse she dislikes? You know that it was only random chance that you fell into the pool that you did? The curse did not pick you specifically warrior. Your friend Ryoga could just as easily have fallen into the same pool.”

Ranma laughed, “It would serve Ryoga right to have fallen in the Nyannichuan. Then he’d...”

“Ranma Saotome, prepare to die!”

Upon hearing the familiar challenge, Ranma dropped into his fighting stance and looked up to the roof of the main house where the enraged Ryoga stood ready. But Ryoga did not leap down on top of him, instead he disappeared over the roof towards the garden on

the other side. Ranma broke into a run through the house followed closely by the coyote. They got to the veranda just in time to see Ryoga engaged in battle with... Ranma.

“What the... That’s... that’s me!”

“Oh course it’s you warrior. These visions are about you so it stands to reason that you would be in some of them.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot that part.” Ranma watched himself fight and was rather pleased with his performance, “Hey, I’m better than I thought.” he said smugly.

Just then the vision-Ranma swung a wild roundhouse kick at Ryoga that was easily blocked, but it threw both fighters off balance and they tumbled into the pond together.

“Oh yes, that was poetry in motion!” snickered the coyote.

The black piglet was the first to drag himself from the pond. He shook off the water and squealed in rage. Then a buxom girl with short light brown hair tied back with a yellow bandana stood up from the pond and wrung water out of the front of her yellow tank top. “Shut up Ranma,” she shouted at the piglet, “This is all your fault anyway.”

The piglet squealed again and began jumping up and down at the edge of the pond. The girl waded over and swatted at the piglet with a wet hand. Suddenly Akane rushed past Ranma and the coyote out into the garden.

“Ranma you idiot! What have you done now?” Akane screamed at the piglet. Then she extended a hand to the girl who was still standing knee deep in the koi pond, “Are you all right Ryoga-chan?”

“I’m fine Akane-chan, it was my fault for letting Ranma get one through on me.”

“Would you like to use our bath to change back? Your clothes are soaking wet, I could try to dry them out for you.”

“No thank you Akane-chan, I don’t mind spending the afternoon as a girl, but could you loan me something dry to put on again?”

“Of course Ryoga-chan,” said Akane while taking the girl’s hand and pulling her towards the house. Turning to look over her shoulder she shouted, “Ranma, don’t forget to pull your clothes out of the pond and put them in the laundry before you change back!”

Ranma watched dejectedly as the two girls walked into the house while the little piglet with the braided pigtail on its head tried unsuccessfully to fish a red silk shirt from the pond.

“It would seem,” said the coyote, “that it’s not the curse of drowned girl that Akane dislikes. Wouldn’t you agree warrior?”

“Yeah, but it didn’t happen this way.”

“But it could have. Just as you could have chosen not to fight your father at Jusenkyo and avoided all of this in the first place. Your life will be filled with such choices and the outcome of many will be equally as random.”

Ranma turned away from the garden only to see the female Ryoga standing half naked in the living room of the Tendo’s home. He was holding the still dripping wet tank top up to cover his breasts. Akane ran back down from up stairs and handed the girl a towel and a bundle of clothes.

“Thanks Akane-chan,” Ryoga said, “you didn’t have to go to all this trouble.” As Ryoga began to dry himself off, Akane just watched with a pleasant smile on her face.

The faceless little spirit children suddenly reappeared and swarmed once again around Akane. As Ranma and the coyote watched two of them separated from the others and ran to Ryoga. Slowly their faces began to take on color and in an instant two little tow-headed, fang-toothed children stood at the girl’s side.

“What just happened?” asked a bewildered Ranma.

The coyote laughed, “They’ve chosen a father.”

“But that’s Ryoga in a dress!” Ranma shouted.

Coyote smiled, “Exactly.”

Ryoga finished dressing then he and Akane moved off down the hallway towards the front door followed by the four little spirit children, two of which now had faces. As they disappeared around the corner Ranma heard a wet slapping noise from the veranda behind him. He turned to see the little black piglet dragging a soaking wet red Chinese shirt and black pants up the steps. As he watched it dragged them into the house and down the hallway towards the bath.

o o o

“Okay, now what?” Ranma said after they had been standing in the silent house for some time.

“Well,” said the coyote, “I don’t know about you but I’m getting hungry. What do you say we go find a bite to eat?” Without waiting for an answer the coyote turned, walked down the hall and quickly disappeared around the corner.

“Hey, wait up,” cried out Ranma as he jogged down the hallway after the spirit guide. As he rounded the corner, expecting to see the genkan and front door of the Tendo home, he found himself instead inside his favorite ice cream shop. The coyote was already sitting there waiting for him.

Ranma looked around the familiar shop, but it was filled with a most unfamiliar sight. All the tables were filled with fuzzy faceless bodies. It looked like an artist’s sketch that had never been completed. “Kami-san, are these more spirit children?”

“No, these are the faceless people that surround you every day of your life. They never come into focus unless you decide to recognize them as individuals.” Seeing a worried expression cross the young man’s face he added, “Don’t worry warrior, it’s nothing unusual. All humans tune out the majority of people around them. From what I have seen of Japan so far I would say it is a necessity here.”

Ranma spotted one person in the shop that wasn’t a faceless blob. Sitting at a booth in the back was Akane with a scowl on her face. “Hey look, Akane’s here and it looks like that Ryoga girl stood her up.”

“This was a completely different vision warrior. The female version of your friend does not exist here.”

“Yeah, then how come she looks so mad?”

“Perhaps she is waiting for someone else who is late?”

At that moment the little bell attached to the door of the shop tinkled and Ranma turned to see himself walk through the door. The vision-Ranma strode across the room and plopped into the seat across from Akane. Ranma could see their mouths moving, but couldn’t hear anything.

“It’s not necessary to hear what they are saying warrior,” the coyote said in anticipation of Ranma’s question, “Just watch and observe what happens.”

The vision-Ranma continued to talk animatedly even though Akane had stopped trying to get a word in edgewise and was beginning to look even angrier. When the vision-Ranma put his feet up on the seat and began laughing, Akane reached her hand up into the air with her palm held open.

Ranma looked up at the ceiling and floating there were the two faceless spirit children from before holding a large mallet between the two of them. They let go of the mallet and it dropped conveniently into Akane’s open hand.

“I always wondered where that thing came from,” Ranma said as he waited for the inevitable blow to come. Akane swung the huge mallet down landing it squarely on top

of the vision-Ranma's head and his unconsciousness body sprawled lifelessly across the seat. Akane handed the mallet back to the two spirit children and got up to leave.

"That could have gone better," Ranma said dejectedly.

"Really?" asked the coyote, "How so?"

"Well for one thing I usually don't come into this place as a guy. Guys can't order the really neat desserts, ya know?"

"Is that so? Well, let's see if you're right."

At that, the vision-Ranma disappeared and the scowling Akane reappeared at the booth. This time when the door's bell rang Ranma watched his female self enter the shop wearing a pair of pink coveralls that had originally been Akane's.

"Aw geeze," Ranma winced, "How come I'm wearin' that? I hate those coveralls!"

"Why?" asked the coyote, "I think they look cute on you."

"That's exactly *why* I hate 'em!"

As they watched, the vision-Ranma crossed the shop and greeted Akane but before sitting down she bowed and seemed to be making an apology. Akane's face lit up as the vision-Ranma sat down across from her. A waitress Ranma recognized appeared and took their order. Even though the vision-Ranma wouldn't stop talking like before Akane's smile never wavered.

When the vision-Ranma began laughing again, Ranma looked up at the ceiling. Sure enough the two faceless spirit children were floating there, but instead of the huge mallet, each one was playing with a kendama (4).

One of the spirit children seemed to notice Ranma watching them and tapped the other on the arm. It pointed right at Ranma and then the other one nodded to some unspoken question. They floated down to the table where they landed between Akane and the vision-Ranma.

Ranma gasped as slowly smiles formed on the blank faces of the two little spirits. Noses, eyes and black hair followed in quick succession. Where two faceless spirits had been moments before, there were now two beautiful little children.

Ranma turned to coyote, "Did... did they just pick me?"

"Yes warrior, those two have chosen you. If the girl also chooses you they will be born and become your children."

“But, it looked as if they could see me. They even pointed at me.”

“They are not part of your vision warrior. They are free spirits and as such appear here of their own will. You see...” The coyote trailed off when he noticed that Ranma was no longer listening to him. Instead Ranma was staring at something near the front of the shop.

There, sitting on top of the cash register playing with a kindama of its own was another faceless spirit child. It expertly flipped the ball from one face of the little hammer to the others with almost inhuman speed. As Ranma watched, it tossed the ball high into the air again and then reached around behind its back with the kendama. When it brought the toy out in the open again, the ball rested squarely on the spike.

“Is that one of the others,” Ranma asked, “the ones that chose Ryoga instead of me?”

“That is not one of Akane’s children,” said the coyote sternly, “Pay it no mind.”

But Ranma continued to watch the little spirit and it watched him back. Soon a smile appeared on its face then a nose. Color flooded the child’s hair and soon a long braid of flaming red descended down its back. Finally eyes of the most intense blue Ranma had ever seen appeared and he gasped at the image they formed. The child winked at him and then sprang into the air.

It leapt clear across the room in a single bound coming to a handstand on Ranma’s head. He could feel only the barest impression of the tiny hands on the top of his head before she vaulted off in the direction of Akane and the other children. The little spirit danced across the tabletops and came to rest at last on the shoulder of Ranma’s vision double.

“Kami-san, could that possibly be...”

“Don’t be silly warrior,” said the coyote, “The spirits of children do not attach themselves to men, so pay that one no mind. Remember the quest we are on and the thing we are seeking.”

“The Spring of Drowned Man,” Ranma whispered in response, but he was unable to take his eyes off the little redheaded girl as she continued to play with her toy.

“Come along, we are nearing the end of your journey. I have but one more thing to show you before we reach your goal.”

The coyote turned and padded out of the door. Almost mechanically Ranma followed it, but he really didn’t want to leave the little spirit behind. When he got outside he found himself once again in front of the Tendo dojo.

“Why are we back here Kami-san?” he asked.

“There is someone here I would like you to meet,” said the coyote as he headed into the dojo.

Ranma followed and once inside he saw a handsome young man performing a warm up kata (5) on the practice floor. He and the coyote watched the young man in silence for several minutes before Ranma whispered, “Hey, this guy’s really good!”

“He ought to be good, you trained him.”

“What?” cried Ranma in surprise, “He’s my student? That means I become a teacher after all?”

“Not necessarily,” said the coyote somberly, “This young man is your only student. You have dedicated your life to training him to become the greatest martial artist alive and he will grow to surpass you in every way.”

Ranma watched the man more intently and in his moves he could see his own influence clearly, “But why do I end up training only him? What makes this guy so special?”

“You owe him a debt greater than your own life. Out of shame and regret, you will train only him for the rest of your life.”

The young man finished his warm-up and crossed to the far end of the dojo. There he began stacking cinderblocks. Ranma watched in morbid fascination, wondering what terrible thing he must have done to this guy.

Then suddenly the spirit children appeared and ran swarming to the young man. They jumped at him, reached for him, but they never could manage to touch him. One by one they gave up in their attempts and one by one their faces faded away until they were all once again without form.

“Kami-san, what’s happening to the children?”

“They have lost all hope of ever being born. They are trapped now between this world and the next and they will never be free until the mother they chose is dead.”

“But why? Is it because of this guy? Does he marry Akane or somethin’?”

“No, this man will never marry.”

“Who is this guy?” Ranma was becoming upset. The spirit children had all disappeared now, fading out of existence as though they had never been there at all. “Kami-san, who is this guy?”

As Ranma watched the young man finished building his stack of blocks and took a stance in front of them. He laid his palm gently on the top block and then after a few calming

breathes raised his hand above his head. A ball of pure energy formed around the man's hand and grew in intensity as he slammed it down towards the stack of blocks. Just millimeters from the surface his hand froze in midair, but the ball of energy proceeded to blast its way down through the stack reducing it to a fine gray powder.

The man's enraged cry hung in the air and echoed through the room like the clear pealing of a church bell. Ranma tried not to hear the words and prayed they wouldn't be what he most feared to hear, but he could not deny them forever. "Ranma no BAKA!"

o o o

"Kami-san, please tell me that isn't Akane? Tell me I didn't do something that stupid!"

Out on the practice floor the young man had fallen to his knees over the remains of the cinderblocks and was crying softly into his hands. Ranma was nearly in tears himself, "Please Kami-san! Tell me this isn't going to happen! Kami-san?"

Ranma turned towards the coyote and gasped. Standing there petting the big animal was the little red haired spirit. She looked up at him for one second with those impossibly blue eyes and his heart filled with sadness. Then the eyes faded away along with the rest of her face and she was once again a blur to him.

"No!!!" Ranma fell to his knees as tears began to pour from his eyes, "Not her too! Not m-m-my little girl!"

The coyote turned away from the faceless spirit and addressed Ranma sternly. "I told you to pay that one no mind! You are a man and you desire to be a man in all things. What use do you have for the unborn spirit of a child who foolishly attached itself to you because of a curse you are planning to be rid of someday?"

"But it isn't fair!" cried Ranma.

"Life isn't fair warrior. It is filled with pain and death. Be happy for this little one, that her suffering will only last until you die. Had she been born into this world, it would have continued on forever."

Ranma sobbed in spite of himself.

"What did you expect? That I would only show you what you seek and not make you see the consequences of finding it?" The coyote regarded the pathetic figure kneeling before him. "Get up! Your walk is nearly over. It is time to show you the true location of the Spring of Drowned Man."

The coyote turned and walked through the door without waiting. Ranma wiped the tears from his eyes and looked up to see the little faceless spirit staring down at him. It raised

its little arm and waved at him with a hand that had no fingers. Then it faded from existence.

Ranma choked back a cry and tried to regain control himself. He staggered to his feet and took one more look at the anguished young man that had once been his fiancé. Then he turned and followed the spirit guide through the door.

He walked into a white fog so thick that he could barely see the ground under his feet. He stepped cautiously forward, searching with his feet for the step down that he knew must be there, but when his foot slipped off into empty space he found himself pitching forward into the Tendo's koi pond. He was barely able to regain his balance in time to avoid falling in.

He took a step back from the edge and covered his face with one hand, "That was a close one," he said out loud. Turning towards the house he took a step forward and then uncovered his face. He found himself once again teetering on the brink of a fall. Only this time it was from an outcropping of rock high above the crater of a massive volcano. Far below at the bottom of the crater, light glinted off the surface of a calm pool of water.

He struggled to regain his balance again, his heart pounding at the prospect of falling to his death this time. When he was once again on solid footing he heaved a sigh of relief and looked over his shoulder to where the Tendo's koi pond still sat peacefully just a few feet away from the shear drop in front of him. "What gives Kami-san? What is this place anyway?"

The coyote sat on the top of a nearby rock completely unaffected by the strange surroundings. "This is what you are searching for warrior, that pool at the bottom of this ancient volcano is the cursed Spring of Drowned Man. One dip in that water will bring an end to your curse and set into motion a new future for you."

"But why is the koi pond here too?" Ranma asked.

"That represents the choice you will have to make when at last you find the spring. On the one hand a long perilous drop into lasting manhood and on the other the calm cool familiarity of the Tendo household. Whichever one you choose, the other will cease to exist."

"Wha'd ya mean, 'cease to exist'?"

"Just that, choose manhood and you will never be welcome in the Tendo house again. Chose the Tendos and you will spend the rest of your life cursed. You will not have much time to make that choice, but at least now you know what is at stake. You are a great warrior Ranma Saotome, you *will* make the right choice."

"I'm glad you're so sure 'bout that," Ranma said cynically.

“This is the end of your spirit walk, but let me leave you with a bit of advice. Throughout their lives, humans will only make one or two choices that have a direct effect on the course of their lives. But every day they are faced with hundreds of little choices that add up to make more difference in the quality of their lives than all the big ones put together. Don’t become so focused on the big decisions that you miss making the little ones, okay?”

“Yeah, little choices. I got it. What happens now?”

“Now?” the coyote said with a chuckle, “I leave and you go back to reality. So long warrior and thanks for the trip to Japan!”

With that the coyote stood up and bounded off the rock, disappearing into the gray mists beyond the koi pond. Ranma looked up and realized that he was still standing on the rock between the pond and the precipice. He gazed once more down into the abyss and wondered what it would be like to jump in and never have to be a girl again. That thought tugged at something deep inside and he involuntarily edged back towards the koi pond.

“Hey,” he cried out, the word echoing hollowly across the crater, “What do I do now?”

Suddenly he felt lightheaded and found himself leaning out over the chasm again. He scrambled to back away from the edge but the world began swimming around him. Then he slipped and suddenly he was falling... falling... falling...

o o o

Ranma awoke with the familiar scents of his bedroom filling his nostrils; smelly athletic socks in the clothes hamper, his father’s after shave, and the smell of panda hair. There was another scent too, a familiar one like flowers in springtime. “Akane?” he whispered.

“I’m here Ranma!” Akane answered. Ranma felt her take hold of his hand. “Are you feeling better? You’ve been sick all night long.”

He tried opening his eyes but something cold and wet was covering them. He tried to sit up and Akane helped him. The damp washcloth fell from his face and landed in his lap. He looked down at it past the two great mounds of flesh attached to his chest and realized that he was a girl.

“I’m sorry about the cold washcloth,” Akane apologized, “you were feverish and Kasumi thought cold compresses would help.”

“That’s all right,” Ranma said with a weak smile, “they probably did help and I don’t mind. What happened to me?”

“We’re not sure. We all came home from dinner and found you unconscious in the bathtub. Your father pulled you out and carried you in here then we called Dr. Toufuu,

but he said that it sounded like a virus and we should just let you sleep through it. Kasumi thinks it was the muffins I baked for you, but it couldn't have been my muffins... don't you think?"

Ranma listened to the pleading tone in her voice and decided not to kid her about it, "Naw, they were fine Akane. I ate a few just before I started feeling weird. Did anyone else eat them?"

"No," she said with a hint of anger, "Kasumi insisted on throwing them away."

"*Good!*" he thought, "Hey, I'm starvin'. Why don't I get dressed and we can go out for somethin'?"

"Are you sure you feel up to it?"

"Oh sure, just give me a few minutes to put myself back together."

"Okay, the bath water is still hot if you want to change. I'll go tell everyone else that you're feeling better."

Akane got up and left the room while Ranma tried to clear his head. The spirit walk was still vivid in his mind. Unlike his dreams, which he always forgot soon after waking up, every detail stood out as if ingrained on his memory. But what did it all mean? Was that really the Spring of Drowned Man? Would he really find it one day and what terrible choice would he have to make in order to avoid hurting Akane and ruining his own future?

He pulled himself up off the futon and headed for the door intending to take a quick dip in the hot bath, but as he crossed the room the sound of a dog howling in the distance drifted in through the open window. It reminded him somehow of the lonely nights he and his father had spent in the wilderness. Those long nights sitting alone by a small campfire, when Ranma had wanted to count every star in the sky and his father had talked incessantly about their future. He remembered one night in particular when his father kept asking him about some sort of training, something involving sausages and... cats.

A shudder ran down Ranma's spine as he remembered Genma actually giving him the choice to take the Nekoken training or not, "Choices..." he whispered, "Every day we make lots of little choices that change the course of our lives." He looked at his reflection in the mirror over the dresser and then turned away from the door.

He crossed the room to his closet and opened it up. There sat the two baskets Kasumi kept neatly filled with piles of silk shirts and black pants. He looked at the far end of the closet where a small assortment of strange costumes was hanging. He cringed at the sight of the bunny girl suit, but smiled when he saw the waitress outfit and the Furinkan High

School girl's uniform. Behind them all he spotted a splash of pink and an idea came to him.

Five minutes later, dressed in a yellow t-shirt and a pair of pink corduroy coveralls with the word 'China' stitched across the front, Ranma headed once more for the bedroom door. As he reached for the doorknob he froze and a chill ran through him. He whipped around searching frantically with his eyes, but the room was empty.

"Must be some of those muffins still workin' on me." he laughed. "Ain't no way that part's comin' true." He turned and opened the door to find Akane standing in the hallway outside.

"Oh!" she cried out in surprise, "Ranma, I thought you were going to get changed?"

"Naw," he said with a smile, "I suddenly had a real cravin' for some ice cream and I don't really mind spendin' the afternoon as a girl."

"You don't?" Akane looked puzzled.

Ranma stepped through the door, but as he turned to close it he took one more long look around the room. It was probably just his imagination, but he could have sworn that he had heard the sound of laughter and the tiny voice of a little girl saying, "Mama no baka!"

The End

All characters in this story are a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead is purely coincidental.

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Author's Notes:

(1) genkan – this is the area just inside the front door of a Japanese home where you remove your street shoes before entering the house.

(2) bento box – this is a Japanese style lunch box. They often consist of several small compartments that are traditionally filled with a variety of bite-sized food items and rice.

(3) dojo – this is a traditional Japanese martial arts training hall. Typically a large open building with a hardwood floor surrounded on all sides by a raised platform on which the participants sit while awaiting their turn.

(4) kendama – this is a traditional Japanese toy that is shaped like a hammer and has a wooden ball tethered to it. The object is to swing the ball up and catch it on one of the concave faces of the hammer. When you get really good at it, there is a spike on top that you can skewer the ball with.

(5) kata – this is an established pattern of martial arts moves used either for practice, exhibition or to warm up before a match.