

## Sidedoor (S10E12) – Til Death Do Us Part?

**Lizzie Peabody:** Hey there, Sidedoorables, this Valentine's Day we're bringing you a different take on love. If you have a blanket handy, you might want to snuggle up under it. Not to get all cozy and romantical, but because this episode gets a little scary, with gory scenes and adult themes. So if you're listening with children, you might want to save this one for later.

**Lizzie:** This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

**Lizzie:** A long time ago in Edo, Japan, there lived a young woman called Okiku.

**Kit Brooks:** *She's a maidservant in the household of a wealthy samurai.*

**Lizzie:** Telling this story is Kit Brooks, a Japan Foundation assistant curator of Japanese art at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art.

**Kit Brooks:** *And this samurai is enamored of her and very much wants to sleep with her. She does not reciprocate this in any way whatsoever.*

**Lizzie:** But the samurai doesn't take no for an answer. He puts more and more pressure on her, but Okiku still refuses him.

**Kit Brooks:** *And in his household, there is a family heirloom, which is this set of 10 blue and white Dutch plates, which is a very, very valuable item in the household. And he takes one of the plates and hides it, and he says that he will blame Okiku for it and says, "If you don't sleep with me, I'm going to tell everybody that you stole this plate."*

**Lizzie:** For Okiku, this means her reputation would be completely destroyed—she'd be fired, and no one would ever want to hire her again.

**Kit Brooks:** *So Okiku is just so distraught. She doesn't know what to do. So in her despair, she throws herself down a well on the property and dies. And in the story, every night we hear through the dark night, the sounds of the counting: one, two, three, to get to the nine plates that all make up this set.*

**Lizzie:** Okiku's ghost desperately wants to be able to count to 10 to complete the set, but there is no 10th plate.

**Kit Brooks:** *And so once we get to nine, there is just this inhuman wail.*

**Lizzie:** But in the end, Okiku gets her revenge.

**Kit Brooks:** *This wailing drives the samurai insane.*

**Lizzie:** Ghost stories have a long tradition in Japan, and so, so many of these old ghost stories are all about love gone wrong. Because in Japan's deep past, when love went sideways, things could get scary. But the Japanese have a way to placate these spirits.

**Kit Brooks:** *Telling their stories. And that helps the ghosts be satisfied—sort of—with what's happened to them.*

**Lizzie:** So this time on Sidedoor, we bring you ghostly tales of dangerous passions and ill-fated love, and explore what Japan's tradition of female ghosts can tell us about love and power. So hold tight to your loved one—or on second thought, maybe scooch away from that person a little bit until we come back after the break.

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**Lizzie:** There is a woman so famous in Japan that her story has inspired centuries of plays and films—there's even manga and anime versions. This woman is a ghost.

**Kit Brooks:** *And her name is Oiwa.*

**Lizzie:** *Oiwa.*

**Kit Brooks:** *Oiwa.*

**Lizzie:** That's Kit Brooks again. Kit recently co-curated an exhibition called "Staging the Supernatural: Ghosts and the Theater in Japanese Prints," all about some of Japan's most popular supernatural stories from the stages of Kabuki and Noh theater.

**Lizzie:** Kit says the story of Oiwa is inspired by a real person and real-life events, but the story was first told on the Kabuki stage in the early 1800s. If you were a theater-goer back then, you'd have crowded around the stage, ready to be wowed by elaborate costumes and exciting special effects, knowing the spectacle about to unfold would raise the hairs on the back of your neck. And then the play would begin something like this ...

**Kit Brooks:** *So there's a woman called Oiwa, who's living with her husband, Iemon, and they're vastly living in poverty now. He's lost his job, and they're living in a really, really rundown area.*

**Lizzie:** And lemon, well let's just say he's a pretty horrible person to be married to.

**Kit Brooks:** *For example, he sells all of her possessions because he wants to use them on other women.*

**Lizzie:** Near the start of the play, he rips away the mosquito net that protects their newborn son's bed. Oiwa grabs it to try to stop him, but ...

**Kit Brooks:** *He rips it away with such ferocity that it pulls all of her fingernails out.*

**Lizzie:** *[gasps]*

**Lizzie:** And lemon is a samurai, which means he's supposed to be a person of high honor—which he obviously is not. So Oiwa's father wants to get his daughter out of this horrific marriage.

**Kit Brooks:** *So lemon kills him.*

**Lizzie:** After her father's death, Oiwa gets very sick. She was already weak from the recent birth of her son, and now she's also grief-stricken. Things are not going well.

**Kit Brooks:** *And one day, a wealthy neighbor that they have, who is a doctor, sends over this package of medicine to help improve her blood circulation. And so she, you know, retires to her bedroom to take this medicine.*

**Lizzie:** But when she takes it, something is not right. The audience watches as Oiwa grimaces in pain, bends over and falls onto her bed. Meanwhile, lemon, totally unaware of what's happening to wife, is next door thanking their doctor neighbor for sending over this, um, medicine. But the doctor has a confession to make.

**Kit Brooks:** *His granddaughter is hopelessly in love with lemon, and she's threatened to kill herself if they cannot be together. So the grandfather, wanting to support his granddaughter, has concocted this scheme where the medicine he sent over is actually poison and it's gonna horrifically disfigure Oiwa. And he hopes that once Oiwa has lost her beauty, lemon will then be amenable to marrying his granddaughter instead.*

**Lizzie:** *Gosh, nobody is on Oiwa's team!*

**Kit Brooks:** *[laughs] No!*

**Lizzie:** *She's—the cards are really stacked against her!*

**Lizzie:** At this point, Iemon still isn't entirely convinced he wants to abandon his wife and child and marry this love stricken neighbor girl. But then ...

**Kit Brooks:** *The grandfather then offers him a lot of money as well.*

**Lizzie:** And he's like, "Deal!" But now he needs to find a way to get rid of his current wife. He can't just divorce her for no reason.

**Kit Brooks:** *So he arranges for one of his friends to go to the house to abduct Oiwa, and then he can say there's infidelity and that she's run away with another man and therefore he's fine to remarry. So he sends someone over, this person Takuetsu. And when Takuetsu sees Oiwa, the poison has already taken effect.*

**Lizzie:** This sight is one of the most iconic moments in the play. The audience experiences it right along with Takuetsu.

**Kit Brooks:** *Because up until that point, Oiwa has been covering her face with her hair and she's been in darkness, so you don't know what she looks like and she doesn't either. And the audience realizes it at the same time. And you see her looking into a mirror and she sees what she looks like.*

**Lizzie:** One of Oiwa's eyes is now covered by a bulging tumor. Her hands shake as she tries to make herself more presentable to her visitor.

**Kit Brooks:** *So she starts to do her makeup, as it were.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh!*

**Kit Brooks:** *And so she starts to brush her hair, and as she's brushing her hair and trying to cover this lump that has appeared on her head, her hair just starts falling out. And it falls out in these bloody clumps.*

**Lizzie:** Takuetsu is so shocked at the state of this poor woman, he totally abandons that evil plan of Iemon's. In fact he feels so sorry for her ...

**Kit Brooks:** *He ends up telling Oiwa everything. He tells the whole scheme to her, and she is so infuriated with what has happened. You know, she knows everything now. She wants to go and confront her husband.*

**Lizzie:** But Takuetsu tries to stop her. They struggle.

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**Kit Brooks:** *And in the struggle with Takuetsu, this screen has got knocked over. And it's a white paper screen, and there is just this haunting moment where she holds a lump of her fallen hair and squeezes it over this screen, and blood pours out of it.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh my God!*

**Kit Brooks:** *And just the sound of the blood hitting this screen, and the red on the white. And it's accompanied by a drum beat that really amplifies this dripping sound.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh!*

**Lizzie:** Kabuki theater was known for its special effects. And in the early 1800s, this scene would have left audiences shuddering.

**Kit Brooks:** *And the way that this was done, the actor had a partial wig. So the wig that the actor was wearing was itself in sections, and one of the sections held a blood bag in it. But of course, plastic, you know, didn't exist in the 19th century. So, you know, what would you make a blood bag out of?*

**Lizzie:** *Like a bladder of some kind? Like an animal bladder?*

**Kit Brooks:** *Pretty close. It's actually a puffer fish. So you fill a puffer fish with fake blood, hide it in a partial wig, and then that's what's used.*

**Lizzie:** *Wow! I mean, I'm not even seeing it, but seeing it in my mind's eye is horrifying.*

**Kit Brooks:** *It is horrifying, yeah.*

**Lizzie:** And things only get worse for Oiwa from there. In her struggle with Takuetsu ...

**Kit Brooks:** *Oiwa unfortunately falls against the blade of a sword, and it slits her throat and she dies. But as she falls down and dies, she dies whilst cursing lemon with just everything that she has. It's just this absolute cursing of lemon and desire to get her revenge. That's the kind of energy that she leaves this world with.*

**Lizzie:** Powerful, angry energy. Vengeful, ghost-making energy.

**Kit Brooks:** *Takuetsu runs out of the house, and lemon sees him on the way home. And when lemon reenters the house and he sees that Oiwa's died, he thinks, "Well, I've got to cover this up somehow, because I'm going to get the blame for this." So he kills their household servant, this person Kohei, as well.*

**Lizzie:** *Why?*

**Kit Brooks:** *This servant has heard everything, and so lemon murders him so that he can then say that they ran away together.*

**Lizzie:** *I see.*

**Kit Brooks:** *So he has his friends take their bodies away, and they actually nail them to either side of a door.*

**Lizzie:** *A heavy wooden door called a raiendoor in Edo Japan. And he dumps the door in a river. And then, lemon thinks, "I'm free."*

**Kit Brooks:** *Now he's set to marry his new wife, the granddaughter from his neighbor, and they get married that same day.*

**Lizzie:** *The same day? Holy schnankies!*

**Kit Brooks:** *[laughs] I don't know what to tell you. It's awful.*

**Lizzie:** *Wow! Wedding planning is just—must have been very different back then.*

**Kit Brooks:** *He was keen, I guess is what I can say.*

**Lizzie:** *That night, the wedding night, lemon lies in bed, blissful and content with his new bride. He rolls over to gaze at her beautiful face.*

**Kit Brooks:** *And as they're laying in bed together, her face starts to transform into Oiwa's face.*

**Lizzie:** *[gasps]*

**Lizzie:** *That disfigured face with the bulging eye. Terrified, lemon's samurai training kicks in. He reaches for his sword ...*

**Kit Brooks:** *And slashes her throat.*

**Lizzie:** *[gasps]*

**Kit Brooks:** *And once he's done that, of course, he realizes it was all an illusion, and he's just killed his new wife. And this kind of vision of Oiwa was all in his mind.*

**Lizzie:** Horrified by what he's done, lemon runs from the bedroom. And there, in the darkened hall, he's met with another terrifying sight: Kohei, the manservant he'd murdered, whose body is supposed to be at the bottom of the river, is in the hall, attacking his infant son.

**Kit Brooks:** *So once again, you know, he draws his sword, makes the killing blow, and then realizes that he's just killed his new grandfather in-law, the man who was supposed to, you know, fix all of his problems.*

**Lizzie:** Panicked, lemon flees the house and runs into the night.

**Lizzie:** *Wow! So—and is that when it ends? Is that when the play ends?*

**Kit Brooks:** *Not even a little bit.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh my gosh!*

**Kit Brooks:** *You know, we're getting into the intensity of this.*

**Lizzie:** In the light of the following day, lemon is starting to feel a little bit better. He's run into a few people, had some hopeful conversations about his future—he probably had some coffee too, that usually helps. And despite the horrible events of the previous night, lemon is starting to feel like everything's gonna be okay. That evening, he comes to an embankment by the river, picks up a fishing pole, and sits down to relax, take his mind off things for a while. You know, go fishing.

**Kit Brooks:** *You know, I think there's a moment here where this seems kind of very careless in a way. You know, is this really the right time to go fishing?*

**Lizzie:** *[laughs] It's always the right time to go fishing, Kit!*

**Kit Brooks:** *Apparently. And as he's sitting on this riverbank, kind of secure and content that his life is all gonna turn out to be fine after all, his fishing hook gets caught. And of course, he thinks it's a fish, and he's trying to pull up.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh no!*

**Kit Brooks:** *What could possibly be doing this? But as he starts pulling and the resistance is too great, what emerges from the surface is the raiendoor that has the corpses of Oiwa and Kohei on it. They're animated and pleading with him in turn and cursing with him.*

**Lizzie:** And the sight on stage for audiences at this point was a real showstopper.

**Kit Brooks:** *And what makes this so incredible is the actor who plays Oiwa is also the same actor who plays Kohei. So you have the same actor who has to appear as two corpses in the same scene at the same time. And so this is called a Hayagawari or a quick change. And there are certain actors that are really famous for this.*

**Lizzie:** Oh, wow!

**Kit Brooks:** *So the way that this is done, so this kind of explains why it's fishing, because when you're fishing you can be on an embankment. So the embankment is a false stage mechanic. So the actor is hiding underneath it.*

**Lizzie:** In the door are holes for the head and hands of the actor. And there's a dummy body attached, one on each side, one for Oiwa, one for Kohei. And when lemon pulls up the door ...

**Kit Brooks:** *The actor is able to peek through the fake embankment, put his head and hands through the holes and writhe and curse, and then the door is submerged again.*

**Lizzie:** Behind the set of the embankment, eerily quickly, a stagehand helps the actor change their facial prosthetics and makeup.

**Kit Brooks:** *The door is flipped over, the door is pulled up again and revealed ...*

**Lizzie:** And now it's the corpse of Kohei who's able to moan and wail.

**Kit Brooks:** *And that's part of the thrill for the audience, because the audience knows that it's the same actor. The skills of the actor are just as supernaturally mystifying as the characters that they're playing. It's just like a magic trick. It made her presence really feel supernatural, because if you don't know how this is being done, it made that sense that this was really this supernatural event.*

**Lizzie:** lemon throws the door back into the river and runs away—but he is far from being rid of Oiwa's ghost. Over the next several months, she continues to torment him in his dreams—and in life. Because Oiwa was born in the Year of the Rat, she sends hordes of rats to attack people close to him. She murders his friends and family.



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**Kit Brooks:** *And eventually he's living in this remote mountain hermitage to try and escape from Oiwa's visions, but of course he cannot.*

**Lizzie:** After months of being terrorized, lemon is weak, exhausted, and the ghost of Oiwa is ready to enact her final vengeance, with a little mortal help from ...

**Kit Brooks:** *Her brother-in-law, who's been trying to hunt lemon this whole time.*

**Lizzie:** When Oiwa's brother-in-law finally tracks lemon down and confronts him, sword in hand, lemon pulls his sword in return, but Oiwa supernaturally intervenes.

**Kit Brooks:** *So that lemon drops his sword and can't really concentrate, which allows the brother-in-law to kill him once and for all.*

**Lizzie:** *Wow! And that's the end of the play?*

**Kit Brooks:** *That's the end of the play, but it's not the end of Oiwa.*

**Lizzie:** Ever since the play first premiered, Japanese audiences have been—well, hooked. People had never seen anything like it before. There had been ghost stories, but never a ghost as the main character. And audiences were rooting for Oiwa to get her revenge—the more terrible, the better.

**Kit Brooks:** *And I think that's something that we can relate to, that sense of seeing justice played out. Like, we all want to be satisfied that people who do horrible things will get their punishment.*

**Lizzie:** *Even if it's from beyond the grave.*

**Kit Brooks:** *Especially.*

**Lizzie:** *[laughs]*

**Lizzie:** Oiwa and Okiku are just two ghosts in the Japanese canon of spectral spurned women. And it's no accident that the villains in both these stories are men in positions of power, just as it's no accident that the victims—the justice-seeking ghosts—are female.

**Kit Brooks:** *I think because if it was a male character and they're wronged by, you know, their lover, they could take more direct action, whereas the female character is more likely to be able to get that kind of ability to act without constraint in the afterlife rather than in life.*

**Lizzie:** There's a lot of power in being able to terrify. For women and servants, returning to the world as a ghost who could frighten might have given them more power than they ever had in life. In fact, Japanese theater tells a lot of stories of women who wanted this power so badly they turned into demons. We'll tell you one of those after the break.

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**Frank Feltens:** *The play starts with the protagonist being carried into the stage, and that's the big bell.*

**Lizzie:** That's Frank Feltens, curator of Japanese art at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, and co-curator of the exhibition "Staging the Supernatural."

**Lizzie:** Dojoji is the name of the temple welcoming this huge bell he mentioned. And the bell literally takes center stage in this play from Japanese Noh theater. Noh—spelled N-O-H—is centuries older than Kabuki theater, and it's a much more spare form of storytelling. If Kabuki is action-packed Hollywood blockbuster, Noh is elite arthouse cinema. It's slow and often abstract, but in its own way, just as intense. Now back to this particular play and that brand new big temple bell. You see, this temple had been without a bell for a long, long time.

**Frank Feltens:** *I mean, it's such a big occasion for the temple Dojoji. And the head priest is saying, "We are going to consecrate that bell, but, you know, my fellow priests make sure that there are no women on the premises.*

**Lizzie:** The head priest has his reasons for this ban on women, but of course, soon after he's given the order, a woman arrives at the gates of the temple. She says to the priest guarding the gate ...

**Frank Feltens:** *You know, "Oh, I see you have this new bell. I would like to help you consecrate it. I would like to perform a dance," because she is a dancer. And the priest says, "Well actually, I shouldn't let you in, but I'm going to anyway."*

**Lizzie:** Once inside, the woman walks across the stage toward the bell to perform that promised dance. But instead, she stands completely still, for a long, long time. And if that felt uncomfortable to you, imagine that going on for 15 minutes! Because that is what happens in the play.

**Frank Feltens:** *And it's really unsettling because you don't know what is happening. You're waiting for her, because you know at some point she's going to jump up, dance, and this absence of anything happening is very frightening.*

**Lizzie:** When the woman finally starts dancing—disaster! Her dance becomes wild, more and more frenzied, until she jumps under the bell and the bell falls on top of her. The priests all rush in to see what's happened.

**Frank Feltens:** *And the head priest says, "Oh my God! I warned you. I said, this must have been a woman. I told you not to let women in because, here's the story ..."*

**Lizzie:** There was a good reason, you see, that this temple had been without a bell for such a long time.

**Frank Feltens:** *A long time ago there was this innkeeper close by. He had a daughter, and there was this priest visiting on a pilgrimage travel.*

**Lizzie:** And the innkeeper teases his daughter saying, "You know that priest who's staying with us? Well, that is your future husband. He's gonna marry you!"

**Frank Feltens:** *And she walks away believing it, like kids do. So she sneaks into the room of the priest and says, "When are you gonna marry me?"*

**Lizzie:** But the priest is like, "Look, I can't marry you. I'm a priest. I took vows." But she's persistent. So he runs away, but she runs after him, feeling increasingly hurt, embarrassed and angry—very, very angry.

**Frank Feltens:** *And in the process, she is turning into this demon, because she's consumed by this sense of abandonment and sense of unreciprocated love by the priest.*

**Lizzie:** The priest reaches the Dojoji temple, where he asks the monks there to help protect him from this angry, love-struck serpent demon girl who won't take no for an answer. And they hide him under the temple's bell.

**Frank Feltens:** *And she finds him underneath. She curls her snake body, her demon body around the bell, and melts the bell and fries the monk underneath.*

**Lizzie:** And that, says the head priest, is why ever since that terrible day long, long ago, the Dojoji temple has been without a bell, and why women were banned from the premises—and especially from getting near this new bell. And as the priest finishes his story, he and the rest of the monks look over at this new bell that has just fallen on top of this mysterious dancing woman. They brace themselves to peek underneath.

**Frank Feltens:** *The monks jump—jump back, "Oh my God, what have we done? It's the demon all over again!"*

**Lizzie:** *[whispers] Oh my gosh!*

**Lizzie:** The monks quickly perform prayers, recite sutras, try to quell the demon woman.

**Frank Feltens:** *And the demon, you know, curls herself again around the bell, sort of hurts herself by partially frying her own body because it's a hot, fire-breathing snake demon.*

**Lizzie:** In some versions of the story, the serpent demon burns herself to death by her own raging, unrequited passion. In others, the demon escapes to cool down in a nearby river.

**Frank Feltens:** *And then the curtain falls and the play is over.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh! So do we know what becomes of the demon? Is the demon ...*

**Frank Feltens:** *She's still out there.*

**Lizzie:** Frank says stories like this one are all about the dangers of being too attached to our worldly desires—especially love.

**Frank Feltens:** *They tell us a story of love being the most important thing, way more important than nourishment and the air you're breathing as a person because it continues beyond your death. Love still captures you, and I think if it works out, it's this beautiful thing. But if it doesn't work out, it's this incredibly devastating and dark thing that is happening to you.*

**Lizzie:** Love can be as dangerous as it is beautiful. It's why ghost stories like Oiwa's and Okiku's still resonate with people after all this time—from old folktales to Kabuki spectacles to the most famous Japanese horror films of our day.

**Kit Brooks:** *There are some famous films like The Ring and The Grudge, where there is this, like, swollen eye. And that is coming directly from Oiwa. And hair, you know, the long black hair.*

**Lizzie:** And you might even spot Okiku.

**Kit Brooks:** *Like, when you think of Ringu, where this female spirit arises from a well, this is literally where this comes from.*

**Lizzie:** If you've seen these movies, you know that the spirits in these stories are so powerful,

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just telling their story—or even accidentally stumbling across it—can make *you* the target of the ghost's vengeful anger. Oiwa, for example, won't ever rest in peace. The best you can hope for is to never draw her attention, never hear her name, and certainly never speak it. But if you do ...

**Kit Brooks:** *There is a shrine to Oiwa to this day, and historically actors have gone to pay their respects to Oiwa's ghost before they begin a production. Because there were, you know, accidents on set, there were some deaths.*

**Lizzie:** *Uh, well, like, you've just told me this story. Are we okay? Like, am I gonna be okay?*

**Kit Brooks:** *[laughs] I hope so. I have gone on several separate occasions, you know, tried to explain it in as full of terms as I could. I made many offerings to the shrine to explain.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh, good.*

**Kit Brooks:** *So I think—I think we're covered.*

**Lizzie:** *Okay, good. But did you mention specifically a podcast or ...?*

**Kit Brooks:** *Uh ...*

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**Lizzie:** You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. There are so many more ghost stories to be found in the upcoming exhibition, "Staging the Supernatural: Ghosts and the Theater in Japanese Prints" at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art. Find out more on their website, or we'll link to more information in our newsletter. You can subscribe at [SI.EDU/Sidedoor](https://SI.EDU/Sidedoor).

**Lizzie:** If you're listening on Spotify, let us know what you thought of this episode in the comments section right there in the app. In fact, I would love it if you shared *your* favorite doomed love story.

**Lizzie:** For help with this episode, we want to thank Kit Brooks, Frank Feltens and Helena Guzik. Special thanks to Naoko Kamioka.

**Lizzie:** Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. This episode was produced by Amy Drozdowska. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant.

**Lizzie:** Tami O'Neill writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

**Lizzie:** Extra support comes from PRX. If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at Sidedoor(@)si.edu. And if you want to sponsor our show, please email Sponsorship(@)prx.org.

**Lizzie:** I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for ...

*[static]*

**Lizzie:** Hello? Hello?!?

*[static]*

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