



The Rolling Rice Balls

ONCE upon a time an honest and hardworking old man was chopping wood in the mountains. At noon, he sat down on a stump and began to eat his lunch. He accidentally dropped one of his rice balls, which rolled away and down a nearby hole.

“Oh, my, what a waste!” the old man exclaimed, peering down into the hole. As he did, he heard a song coming from inside:

♪The rice ball came a-rollin’
Rollin’, rollin’, rollin’♪

“My, how funny!” thought the old man.

Thoroughly amused, he rolled another rice ball down the hole. Finally, entranced by the song,

the old man tumbled down into the hole himself.

Inside the hole, he found a crowd of mice. “Welcome, old man! Thank you for the delicious rice balls!” the mice said, bowing their little heads in gratitude. “Let us repay you by treating you to some rice cakes!” The mice sang, and they began to pound some rice. The old man feasted on the mice’s delicious rice cakes, and they gave him a fortune in gold coins to take home as a present.

When the old man returned home, he and his wife were thrilled at their good fortune. Next door to them lived a greedy old man and



woman. When they heard the woodcutter’s story, they made plans to imitate the woodcutter and get some of the gold coins for themselves. The greedy old man set out for the mountains with more rice balls than he could carry. When he found the hole, he dumped a flood of rice balls into it and then forced himself inside.

The greedy old man arrived in the mice’s home. When they began to make rice cakes to welcome him, however, he made a sound like a cat and tried to steal their gold. But his plan failed, and the mice beat the greedy old man, who barely escaped with his life.

Perhaps it was only out of fear, but from that day forward the greedy old man was not so greedy. **7**

THE ORIGIN OF RICE BALLS

Rice balls are a very familiar food in Japan and are enjoyed all over the country. They’re a staple of the *bento* lunchboxes that people here take with them when traveling. At supermarkets and convenience stores, rice balls are displayed with a variety of fillings, such as tuna, *konbu* (seaweed simmered in soy sauce) and *umeboshi* (pickled, salted plums). Rice balls are easy to eat with one hand, so they’re a popular choice for lunch among busy businesspeople.

Rice balls are universally loved in Japan, but when did people first start to eat them? Clumps of rice grains thought to be rice balls have been excavated from the Sugitani Chanobatake ruins in Ishikawa Prefecture, which have been dated to the Yayoi Period (300 BC to 300 AD). They have become renowned as “Japan’s oldest rice balls.” It is even said that traces of indentations made by human fingers still remain on these clumps of rice.



Carbonized rice (above) found at the Sugitani Chanobatake ruins (right)

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