For nearly twenty years, we have had a family get-together on New Year’s Day in order to have dinner at the same Chinese restaurant in the same hotel. This included our family of four, my sister’s family, also of four, and, until three years ago, my late mother-in-law. This particular restaurant offers an all-you-can-eat style menu as a New Year’s Day special, where, for a fixed price, the guests can order any number of dishes of their choice.

When the children were young, they would try to order familiar dishes that we always had at home, and my sister and I would try to change their minds saying, ‘You should choose something more expensive today. What about lobster?’ And our husbands would protest saying, ‘Oh, let the kids have what they want.’ After making our choices in this way, the children would each tell us their resolutions for the year to come amid cheers and questions from the others, a little embarrassed by the attention they were getting. This has gone on year after year.

Some years my sister’s family was abroad and was not there, or we were on a trip ourselves on New Year’s Day. But this get-together must have become imprinted in the children’s minds as an institution because even when they were going through a rebellious stage as teenagers and didn’t want to go out with their parents, or when they had been drinking with their friends through the night on New Year’s Eve, they all turned up for this New Year’s dinner.

For me the dinner had become an annual event that I took for granted, something I enjoyed without giving it any particular thought. My mother-in-law, however, had always looked forward to this annual dinner with special relish perhaps because she dined alone most of the
time. The New Year after her death, I realized for the first time that this event, which I had taken for granted, was not going to go on for ever.

In Japan, a family does not usually celebrate the New Year following the death of a family member, but on that New Year’s Day we got together as usual and had dinner at the same Chinese restaurant. A person who should have been there was missing; nevertheless, conversation was as animated as usual and everyone ate as usual with great gusto. I wondered whether this was how life goes on.

This year, our son who had married the year before brought his wife and their baby, and our five-month-old grandson became the centre of attention. My niece, who is working in the US, joined us with her fiancé. They were getting married in Japan in the spring, and everyone made suggestions on where they should go for their honeymoon. Enjoying this lively scene on New Year’s Day, I was suddenly seized with the fear that it was not going to continue forever, and the fear remained in the corner of my heart. My mother-in-law is no longer here today, and someday . . .

In the last few years, many of my friends and acquaintances of my age have died or have become seriously ill. Perhaps this is to be expected when you are in your mid-fifties. A friend’s husband who was full of life the day before is now lying in a coma after a cerebral hemorrhage. Another friend who had just begun to enjoy taking trips with his wife fell ill and died. Yet another is now fighting an illness and suffering from the side-effects of her treatment.

I often become obsessed by the feeling that it must be my or my husband’s turn next. Illness creeps on you unawares and attacks you out of the blue. It seems to me like a nightmarish game of dodge-ball, in which you don’t know where the ball is coming from. It would be impossible for a person with poor reflexes like myself to dodge the ball. This thought makes me cringe with fear.

Maybe because of this thought, I could not fully enjoy the peaceful New Year’s dinner, and I felt all the more strongly that this was something I did not want to lose.

Why do the Japanese make so much fuss over New Year? This is something that has intrigued me since childhood. In the stories about