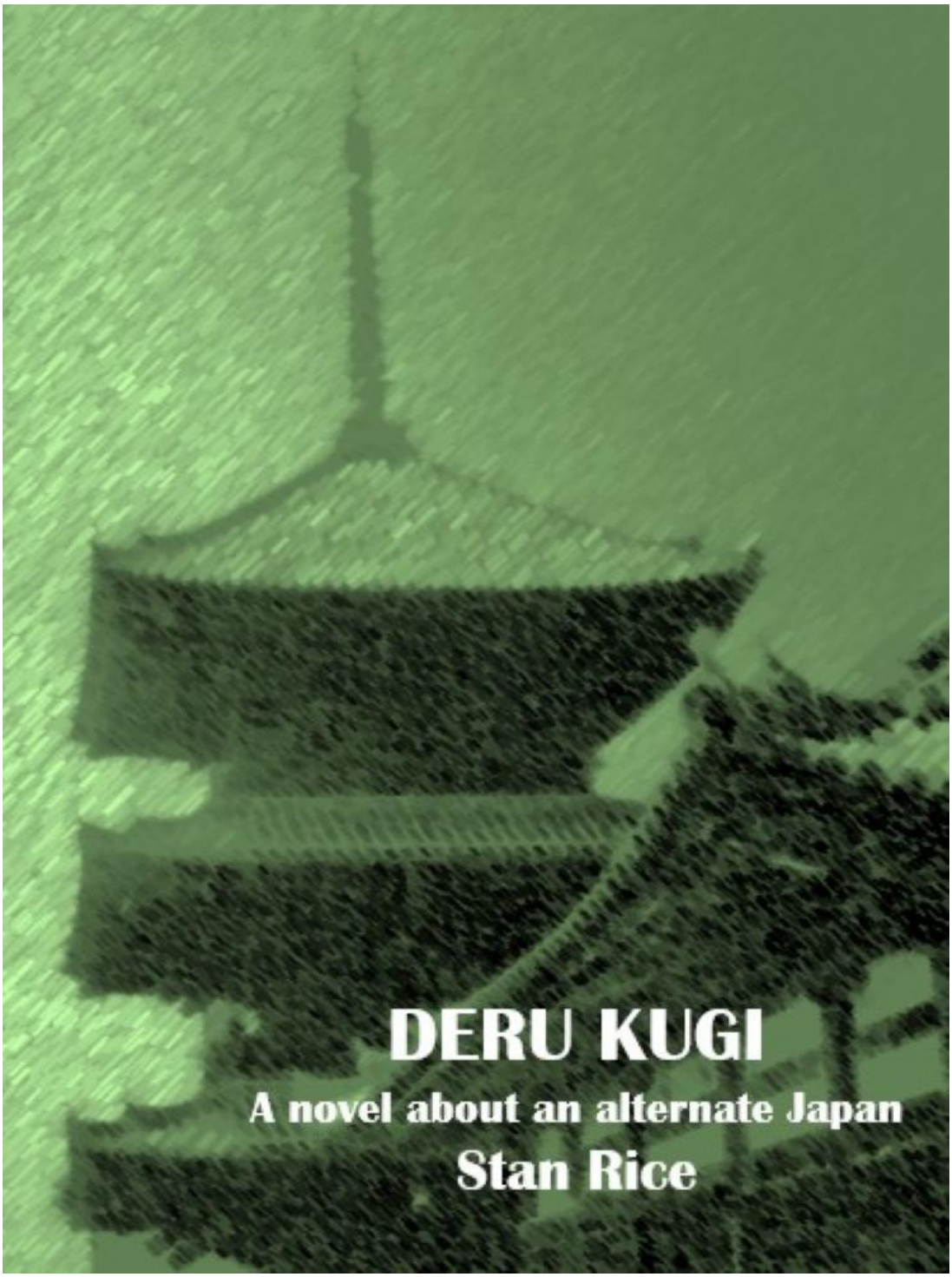

DERU KUGI
A novel about an alternate Japan
Stan Rice

DERU KUGI

出る杭

A novel about an alternate Japan
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Deru kugi wa utareru.
The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.

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Summary of Deru Kugi

Hanao Takemoto was a deru kugi—a nail that sticks out. He was strange in Japanese society because he stayed away from the work-hard-play-harder Japanese business culture. Morey Rice was an American friend who lived with the Takemoto family as an exchange student. Morey fell in love with Hanao's sister Sumiko and never quite recovered from it. Sumiko later married a Japanese man and terminated her friendship with Morey.

Japan had long reposed under American military protection. But when America begins to alienate its allies, Japan looks to a strong, brilliant business leader, who designs sophisticated ninja drones, to build up its military forces: Minoru Heike, Hanao's brother in law, Sumiko's husband. War almost breaks out, with Heike's hard-liners facing Donald Trump's loyalists. War is narrowly averted as Heike and the American Secretary of War both commit ritual suicide. Sumiko, as Heike's widow, feels obligated to kill herself by jumping from a cliff. Morey and Hanao see her and rush to stop her. Will they reach her in time?

Chapter 1

Hanao's business associate, Chiramisu Yamaguchi, had gold coming out of his ass. Literally. He was so rich that, every day after work, he drank cocktails with real gold dust, and sometimes ate sushi with gold foil, gold that the human body cannot digest, leaving it as a component of the waste stream. Chiramisu worked hard all day, every day, but then partied hard every night until midnight. Like many Japanese businessmen, he hit the bars and drank *sake* and ate sashimi and nigiri until he was blind drunk and puking on the sidewalk. He paid high prices for smartly-dressed giggling Japanese women who would laugh at everything he said, even if it was incoherent, and pat his knee. He stumbled into the last tram heading back to his neighborhood, where his wife had learned to not wait for him, but leave some sushi rolls in the refrigerator for him. She was always asleep when Chiramisu got home. Chiramisu's boss didn't mind these nightly escapades, because he was always at the same table. One time he threw up on Chiramisu. They joked about it all the next day at work. The drunken parties were often covered, at least in part, by company funds. He was particularly fond of the dessert tiramisu, but Japanese does not have the syllable "ti."

Hanao Takemoto's office was right down the hall from Chiramisu's. Hanao worked hard all day, every day, then at five he caught the tram home to his house and his wife Akiko. They had one drink together and talked about the interesting things they had experienced during the day, if any. In winter, they would take a walk around the neighborhood, over the little half-moon bridge in the formal garden at the end of the block, then at sunset return home for dinner. In summer, dinner came first followed by a sunset walk. Hanao and Akiko made sushi together. She steamed the rice and sliced the cucumbers and raw fish, he rolled the contents into a seaweed sheet on a blanket of tiny bamboo slats. Not only were Hanao's liver and leg muscles better than Chiramisu's, but his brain as well, for Hanao and Akiko read books or watched online videos about everything from the history of the Silk Road to the biology of turtles. Then they bathed one another while standing, or while sitting on little plastic stools, on the tile floor of the bathroom, as the water and suds drained away. Then they settled together into the wooden tub of very hot water, in which a cloth bag of tangerine peels (left over from Hanao's lunch) floated.

No small number of Japanese business executives fell over dead, long before retirement age, from stress and overwork, something the Japanese called *karoshi*. Hanao was in absolutely no danger of dying of karoshi.

In many ways, Hanao and Chiramisu were alike: the same age, similar in appearance, living in nearly identical houses a block apart in the good part of Ono, a city in Hyōgo Prefecture uphill from the old city of Kyōto. The houses had plenty of room inside, but seemed small because they were crammed next to one another, with intensely cultivated walled gardens but no lawns. Chiramisu earned a lot more money, but Hanao saved his. Hanao also got bonuses for the

company money he did not spend at the bars. Hanao was like a nail sticking out, while Chiramisu was the one who did exactly what all of his business associates (except Hanao) did, his behavior flush with the surface of theirs. As a matter of fact, Hanao's nickname among his friends was Deru Kugi, the nail that sticks out.

Chapter 2

Hanao had had the nickname Deru Kugi for a long time, including back when I knew him in high school. He was and is a tall man with a smooth face and small hands. I was an exchange student from America, a short man with a smooth face and bony hands. My name is Morey Rice, which was just the right name for an American like me to have in Japan. *Mori* means woodland in Japanese, and it perfectly described my love of the outdoors. They sometimes called me *Mori-san.* And with a last name like Rice, I fit right in: they also called me *Kome-san,* the honorable rice. I stayed with Hanao's family for just three weeks, but it was long enough to change my life.

Three weeks was long enough for me to discover how different Hanao was from other students at his high school. It was a college-prep high school and most of the students were male. They studied until the early hours of the morning to get good grades and good scores on college entrance exams. *Pass with four, fail with five:* This was their saying. You could pass a college entrance exam if you slept only four hours a night, but you would fail if you slept five. Hanao slept six. He got good grades and did moderately well on entrance exams, but he also took time to walk and jog and do calisthenics while his fellow students were memorizing useless trivia about American history that even few American students knew. The serious students all knew that Sakura-mento (Sacramento) was the capital of Karihuorunia. Hanao was about the only student who could say the word *calisthenics*, because there is no L in Japanese. He also wrote poetry (not always haiku) and taught himself to play the *shakuhachi* (the Japanese bamboo flute).

It was expected that the college-prep guys would become business executives, and the college-prep girls would become *oeru* (O.L., or office ladies) who traditionally brought in trays of tea to the males but more recently have been getting some actual leadership positions. The college-prep males expected to marry girls from the high school that specialized in homemaking skills. A diploma in how to make really good *miso* soup. But Hanao had married Akiko, a small and pretty woman. Akiko went to a college-prep high school in another part of Japan. A lot of Japanese boys had names that ended in -o, or man; and a lot of girls had names ending in -ko, or child. Aki-ko just meant *autumn child,* a very common name. But she was instantly fascinated when she met a boy named Hana-o, *flower man.*

When I was living with his family, Hanao explained his nickname to me. It was a perfect time for me to learn some Japanese, which I had been diligently studying back in America.

"*Deru* means to exit, or to leave, or protrude, or to stick out," he told me. He showed me the written character for it, and it did indeed look like a little animal with four legs sticking out. "*Kugi* means nail. In Japanese, we use verbs as adjectives, so *deru kugi* means the nail that sticks out. Sounds like me, *neh*. The whole phrase is *deru kugi wa utareru. Wa* is just a particle that indicates the subject of the sentence. *Utaru* means to beat down, to hammer down, to flatten.

Utareru is the reflexive form, to be hammered down. The nail that sticks out gets hammered down."

"In America, we say the squeaky wheel gets the grease. It is a good thing to be a squeaky wheel and get attention," I said. "Like my high school acquaintance Ben. He made a lot of noise and called attention to himself back in school and, now that he is a businessman, he still acts the same way."

"In Japan, Mr. Ben-san would get hammered down," said Hanao. "It is shame to get hammered down in Japan. But I have learned to not care much what other people think."

Another way in which Hanao was a sticking-out nail was that he was a Christian. Most Japanese hold a mixture of beliefs—traditional spirit Shintō, traditional Bukkyō (Buddhism), and a few Christian customs—against a background of daily practical agnosticism. They would bow to household ancestral shrines, burn incense, and celebrate Christmas, without thinking about the theology of any belief system. But Hanao was very serious about his beliefs. To him, bowing to ancestral shrines was a kind of paganism, which he quietly avoided. And he thought it was very important not just to follow the golden rule, but to actually believe that Jesus was, in some way that he could not explain, the Savior. It is hard enough to explain God to most Japanese; how could one explain the Son of God? All the Japanese emperors back to Jimmu in 660 B.C. were considered to be *Tennō*, the son of Heaven. Hanao considered this to be blasphemy.

And this was much of what brought us together when I visited Japan in high school. The officials who put American students in host families took my description of myself as a Christian seriously enough to put me in the Takemoto Christian household. Hanao was openly envious of my freedom to go to church every Sunday. The nearest church to which Hanao could go, even if his parents could justify the time and expense, was fifty kilometers away. Though his religion was part of what made him unusual, he seldom talked about it with his peers.

I had stuck with my Christian beliefs all through college and graduate school, and was now in my second year on the faculty of a little Christian college in the American Midwest. Pantocrator College (P.C.; the name referred to some kind of title for Jesus as the Ruler of All) was like most other small colleges except that the students had to attend chapel services every day, at which preachers told them to disregard all of the science and history that they learned in their classes, and they had to agree to a set of Christian behavior patterns. No alcohol, no dancing, no playing cards, no sex (except with marriage partners). The students found creative ways to get around the rules, or to avoid detection, as the frequent discovery of used condoms in stairwells indicated. And the faculty had to assent to a long list of theological beliefs. Year by year, my Christian faith had grown weaker, although I could still nod my head to (with a lot of interpretive license) the doctrines.

The dissonance between the college doctrines and the realities of the world, especially the scientific world that I studied and about which I taught, finally became great enough that I considered leaving Christian higher education. I applied for and received a year's leave of absence from the college, without pay, starting at the end of the fall semester. I applied for a grant from the Japan-America Friendship Society, funded by a Japanese billionaire. I was

astonished when I received it. My assignment was to spend a year in Japan writing a memoir. Hanao and Akiko offered to let me stay in their guest room. They refused to let me pay them from the housing allowance in the grant.

I was thus in the strange position of having Hanao and Akiko try to evangelize me about Christianity after dinner one evening after I arrived in January. I could assent to everything they said, just as I did at P.C., but my lack of enthusiasm was obvious.

"What problem do you have with Jesus?" Hanao asked me.

"Oh, no problem with Jesus," I said. "My problem is with Christians."

"Like me?"

"No, not like you, Hanao, or you, Akiko, either. My problem is the American evangelical Christians among whom I work at P.C."

"You must not let them get between you and Jesus."

"I know, but this is the reason I have lost interest in Christian education," I said. "It has degenerated into little more than conservative politics. Our most recent college president was chosen by the Board because he was a famous Republican columnist. Even when he had an affair with the wife of one of the Board members, the Board agonized over whether to fire him, because he brought a lot of conservative attention and students—the offspring of other conservatives—to the college. They finally fired him, but this took the wind out of my sails for Christian education."

"You would be more comfortable, perhaps, as a Christian in Japan," said Hanao, "where Christianity is not political. I mean, how can it be? With only one percent of the population?" He meant the one percent who were only Christian and not simultaneously Shintō and Buddhist.

"I'm just glad they never asked me in detail about my belief in evolution," I said. "I accept Jesus for religion and evolution for science."

"That's a problem?" asked Hanao. "Not in Japan."

"I never actually got in trouble over evolution, but the college president said he wanted to talk to me about it. When I went to his office, he wasn't there. His secretary said that he was giving a chapel sermon, and that I could meet him right afterwards.

I explained to my hosts that the crusty old founders of the college chose as its motto *The Truth, No Matter the Cost.* But the college had recently changed its motto to *Look Good, Feel Good.* And that's why chapel meetings were mostly upbeat. How to make evangelical Christianity cool. One speaker talked about the right kind of suit Christian men should wear, right down to the American flag tie-clasp, and the right kind of skirt for Christian women. This was not a long-dark-dress kind of place. The president, still a young man who was proud of his physique, was leading the students in a series of chants with all the usual things, but it fit into the rhythm and music of *Macarena*. "We bring praise to Thee O God, Praise we bring to Thee O God, To Thee O God we bring praise, *Hey Macarena*!" He even danced the limbo under a pole held by the student body president and vice president, then did a backflip.

The oldest member of the faculty, Bald Harry, came up to the president immediately afterwards and told him this was a disgracefully informal use of chapel time. The president

immediately invited Harry to give a chapel talk about the hymnody of Fanny Crosby the next week.

"When he talked to me after chapel," I continued, "the president assured me that I was free to teach what I wanted about evolution, so long as I did not open the door to liberalism. You know, he said, if students think they are animals they will act like animals. I should probably not have said that animals often behave better than humans.

"Another thing that bothers me," I continued telling Hanao, "is that the important issues in the world seem to have little importance to American evangelical Christians. For me, as a scientist, the most important one is what human economies are doing to the environment. We should be defending the Earth that we claim did not evolve but was created by God, against sinful destruction at the hands of human greed. To my colleagues and the administrators at P.C., so long as you oppose abortion, then you have fulfilled your obligation as a Christian. They have anti-abortion rallies but never an Earth Day."

"This is because," said Hanao, "there is big money to be made in depleting the resources of the Earth. And, I understand, many American Christians think that wealth is evidence of God's approval. So if a man gets rich from exploiting resources, such as timber or gold, then God must approve of what he is doing."

I nodded in agreement.

"Same thing here," said Hanao, "without the overt theological overtones. So long as you keep the *kami* happy, you can do what you want to with the forests and seas." *Kami* were the indigenous Japanese Shintō gods.

"I could have just gone along with what the other P.C. faculty do, and not said anything about the environment," I continued, "but I did not. I taught the students about how we are sinfully destroying God's creation. I had a whole raft of Bible verses about how the Old Testament prophets denounced environmental destruction and mistreatment of the poor. Usually the students, brainwashed by their conservative parents and churches, ignored me. But one student in particular took notice and thought about everything I had said."

"That's a good thing, is it not?" asked Akiko.

My face must have darkened because Hanao said, "There is something you wish to tell us, I think."

"Yes," I continued. "This student asked about every environmental problem, from global climate change to world overpopulation. She kept asking if there was any good news. I had to tell her that it looked like the world was headed toward ecological disaster. The world population keeps growing, especially among the poor, and the major countries just keep producing more and more greenhouse gases. Especially America, but also Japan."

"You are correct," said Hanao.

"Rainforests keep getting chopped down," I continued. "By the way, Japan is responsible for a lot of rainforest destruction. You plant lots of trees in Japan itself. What appear to be forests on the mountains are actually tree plantations, with all the trees of one species and in straight lines."

"*Sugi* and *hinoki*," said Akiko, reciting the names of the two major plantation tree species.

"Meanwhile, you continue to invest in the destruction of southeast Asian rainforests. You do not do it yourselves, but you pay the Indonesians to cut down their own forests. You can then tell the world how many trees you have planted. In Japan, that is.

"So all I could tell the student was that our only hope would be the Second Coming of Jesus."

"Which some Japanese Christians believe, and some do not," said Akiko.

"The student then told me," I continued, "that while she technically believed that Jesus would return and put an end to suffering, she was not exactly expecting it to happen any time soon. After all, Jesus proclaimed His Imminent Return two thousand years ago, and we are still waiting for it to happen. And the more I talked with her, the more she kept saying this.

"And then, one day, she wasn't in class. The dean met me after class and told me she had committed suicide. Her note indicated that she felt hopeless and powerless in the face of the ecological disasters happening around the world. The dean then told me that the student had learned a lot of these things in my classes. That is all the dean said at that time. But it was enough to deflate my teaching over the next couple of weeks. I became, myself, so depressed that this was when and why I requested a leave of absence at the end of the semester."

"And here you are," said Hanao. "But you cannot expect Japan, or my friendship, to resolve your problems. You have to face them, my friend." Then he looked at me some more, and added, "There is yet something more you wish to say."

"Yes," I answered. "I have just received word that the father of the student plans to sue me, personally, for sending his daughter into depression. He was thinking about suing the college also, but they said that the fault was all mine, and that they would have stopped me from teaching depressing things if they had known. So the burden of the…" I gulped. "…the million dollar lawsuit is all mine."

"But that is totally unreasonable," said Hanao.

"I think so," I said, "but the fact remains that I did not refer the student to any psychological counsellors even when I suspected that she was depressed enough to do herself harm."

"They will have a hard time proving this," said Akiko.

"I know," I answered. "But somehow this fact doesn't make me happy."

"Are they really going to try to serve you papers in Japan?" asked Hanao.

"Why not?" I asked. Hanao looked confused, because lawsuits are very rare in Japan, compared to America.

*

Late the next afternoon, after Hanao and Akiko were both back home, there was a knock at the door. I remained hidden, fearing it was a lawyer. It was.

"Yes?" Hanao said to him.

The lawyer had dark-rimmed round glasses and a bald head. "There wouldn't happen to be a certain Mr. Morey Rice staying with you?" he asked Hanao.

"No," said Hanao.

The lawyer said, "I will have to check my information sources," he said, and left.

When the door was closed, I approached Hanao and said, "I am amazed. You lied to protect me."

He turned to me and smiled. "No, I did not."

"But you said…"

"In English, if you answer "no," to a negative question, it means you agree. Morey Rice wouldn't happen to be here? *No*, one answers in English; *no, he is not.* But in Japanese, it is the opposite. *No* means, *no, you are wrong; he is here.* By convention of Japanese language, I spoke the truth. Let us just hope he does not, next time, ask in positive terms if you are here."

Chapter 3

Hanao, Akiko and I had decided, before I came, to share our life stories with one another. We decided to even write them out, mostly in English, to read to and leave with each other.

We started sharing our stories one evening in February, when I said to them, "I'd like to hear about how the two of you met."

"We met at a Christian gathering in high school," said Hanao.

"What a wonderful story!" I said.

"It was up in the mountains of Shikoku," said Hanao, referring to the large island adjacent to Honshū, the main island. "Beautiful scenery and fresh air. A lot of group singing, and sermons. We like to get together for Christian teaching. In fact, Japanese word for church is *kyōkai*, which means, *teaching meeting*. I was the only representative from Hyōgo Prefecture, and she was the only one from Hokkaidō." This is the big sparsely-populated north island of the Japanese archipelago. "It was a long trip for her."

"But worth every moment of it," Akiko said.

"We immediately loved one another," said Hanao.

"And now you are married," I said.

"It wasn't quite that simple," said Akiko. "Hanao's parents would not approve."

"They still don't," said Hanao. "But after we reached legal majority, there wasn't much they could do about it, except cut off my inheritance and refuse to attend the wedding."

I was astonished. "So, what did you do for your wedding?" I knew that weddings in Japan were very pricey and elaborate.

"We just met at the prefectural office and signed papers," said Akiko.

"What was the problem?" I asked before thinking.

Akiko and Hanao looked at one another. They whispered to one another before Hanao turned to me. "We can trust you," he said.

"Of course," I said.

Akiko became tense and her smile faded. "Please, *anata*, you tell him." *Anata* just means *you*, but is a wife's affectionate term for her husband.

"What Akiko means to say is that my family did not approve of her social caste."

"It is still unclear to me."

"Akiko's family history includes *burakumin*."

"I have heard the term, while reading Japanese history."

"It refers to a caste of people who, back in feudal era, had jobs that contaminated them. For example, butchers and tanners. Any occupation that puts a person in contact with blood. They were called *eta* and had to live in poor, squalid villages where the other Japanese refused to

go. The others were perfectly happy to eat meat and wear leather, but they wanted no contact with the people who provided these things to them." Hanao did not look up as he spoke.

"Which means we were dirty and smelled bad," said Akiko. "We could have kept ourselves scrupulously clean, but we would have been considered filthy anyway. So most of us didn't bother keeping our houses or ourselves clean. We were untouchables either way."

"Like the caste system in India," I said.

"Not quite so bad as that, Kome-san," continued Hanao. "Discrimination against burakumin has been illegal for decades. No formal records are kept about who is or is not a descendant of the *eta*. The civil government had no problem with our marriage. But my family is strongly prejudiced against burakumin."

"And my family is known to be burakumin," said Akiko. "Hanao's family ask around the old people in my hometown."

"You Americans have these social distinctions also," said Hanao to me. "And they matter. Suppose a rich young man wanted to marry poor hillbilly girl." He had trouble pronouncing *hillbilly*.

"I think I understand," I said.

"Akiko and I had a very intimate discussion when it became clear that we were going to spend our lives together," said Hanao. "We talked about sex—how we would abstain until after we married, for example. And she told me about her ancestry. It made no difference to me, of course."

"But I did not want to presume it made no difference to Hanao or that it should be a surprise." Akiko's R's sounded just a little bit like L's, which made *surprise* sound like *supplies*. "And this is one of the reasons I am so grateful that Hanao asked me to marry him."

"This is yet another way in which I am a *deru kugi*," said Hanao.

"The principal reason that I became a Christian," said Akiko, "was that the Apostle Paul, I think it was, said that there are no social or racial distinctions within the church. *There is neither man nor woman, there is neither slave nor free, but all are one in Christ Jesus.* You see, I do not have all the Christian doctrines figured out. But this one doctrine is all that matters to me. Is Jesus the Son of God? All I know is that He welcomes me."

"Even a *deru kugi* can be a Christian," said Hanao. "As I know."

"And I also," said Akiko.

*

The next evening, Hanao began our exchange of stories. This was a story about a friend of his from high school, who studied very, very hard for the college entrance examinations.

"This story didn't actually happen," he said, holding up the printed sheet of the English translation. "I based it on the story of Jacob and Rachel, in the book of Genesis."

"And Leah," added Akiko.

"I am familiar with the story," I said.

"It is one of the great love stories of literature," said Hanao. "But, as in most love stories, there was a lot of complexity."

AND BEHOLD, IT WAS LEAH

"Yamashita-san! Pay attention to your examination! Quit looking at Fujii-san!" Hirao Yamashita was embarrassed that the juku teacher had interrupted the roll call and focused attention, however briefly, upon him. He wondered, Is it so obvious that his eyes were wandering over to the beautiful young woman who sat beside him? Quickly Yamashita returned to his examination. The students at the evening cram-school, all wearing slate green uniforms and bright green headbands, filled in answers on their computer sheets at a furious speed. The juku-teacher continued with the roll call.

"Hirayama-san!"

"*Hai,*" mumbled a boy, without looking up. His black-rimmed glasses framed bloodshot eyes.

"Inoue-san!" called the teacher, less than a second later.

"*Hai.*" Even though she was in a desperate hurry, the girl took time to use her tiny pencil-sharpener.

When the teacher got to Yamashita's name, last on the list, he did not wait for an answer, having already noticed him. Yamashita was exhausted. Monday through Friday, after a full day of school followed by club meetings, Yamashita attended Shimajima Academy, a juku school, like almost half of his fellow students. Juku, designed to drill students in memorization, to prepare them for college entrance examinations, lasted until 9:00. Afterwards came homework for school, and homework for juku. He got to bed about 1:30. There was a saying among the students: "Pass with four, fail with five," referring to hours of sleep. And then there was school on Saturday morning! Yamashita brushed his disheveled hair back from his face. A few hairs announced the beginning of a man's beard. Before starting another question, he glanced again at Fujii. She had large brown eyes and prominent cheeks. Her hair was straight and chopped-off, like that of all the other girls. Unadorned hair, faces without makeup, and uniforms prevented any female student from outshining any others in appearance.

"Time's up!" shouted the teacher.

"*Baka!*" Yamashita called himself a fool for letting his mind wander: seven questions were unfinished. Surreptitiously he filled in answer "C" for each, on the computer sheet; there was a one in five chance that he would be right. He had noticed that Fujii also had some unfinished questions. Her face betrayed no annoyance. She filled in no answers after the teacher had called time. The students handed all the computer sheets to the front of the room. *Baka!* If only he had waited until now to look at Fujii! There are a few seconds now, while the teacher is picking up the sheets!

Yamashita used those few seconds to look again at Fujii as she opened the notebook with her exquisite handwriting: absolutely clear and precise, yet with a powerful

expressiveness. Hanako, Flower Child, was her first name. Everything about her face was beautiful. Her body was sleek. The uniform could not hide the slight growth of her bosom. There were other beautiful girls in his classes at the daytime school as well as at juku, but Yamashita's attention was first drawn to Fujii's handwriting. She had, he believed, a heart on fire and a mind on ice. She never smiled. She had a scar on her right arm. He always wondered about her and wanted to become acquainted with her, to share her quiet personal struggles, to perhaps even make her smile.

Meanwhile, a girl nearby watched him. Hiroko Takahashi's face was plump, her eyes small, but she was not fat. She kept blinking her eyes, as if they gave her pain.

"We continue our study of Western history tonight," began the teacher. He seemed unusually uncomfortable. "Ancient Middle East history. The stories of the Bible are not considered history by most scholars but remain important cultural reference points in America." He used the transliterated *Baiburu* for Bible, rather than the traditional *seisho,* wise writings. He hesitated, then said, "It is customary in this school to mention the wishes of the founder of the Academy." Everyone knew that Yamagishi Tochiro had originally founded the Academy as a branch of the Young Men's Christian Association. In America, YMCA had come to mean a place for sports; in Japan, Shimajima Academy had become just another juku. "He always said, 'Read the Bible and you will find secrets of success.'"

Having completed the one-sentence sermon required once a year, the teacher launched into the lesson. His book was open at a podium but he did not look at it. He removed his thick glasses. "The nation of Israel was named after a man whose original name was Jacob. He wanted to marry one of his cousins, whose name was Rachel. Both Jacob and Rachel are now common English names. Young men and women couldn't just go and get married back then. He had to pay for her. But he was poor, so he promised to work for seven years to pay her father. He did this, and at the end of seven years their wedding night finally came. They must have had the lights off the whole time, because when he got up in the morning, he discovered that it was not Rachel he had slept with, but her older sister Leah. She was not as beautiful, and she had weak eyes." The teacher permitted himself a smile. "Jacob had to work an additional seven years in return for Rachel. Fortunately, he didn't have to wait that long to have her. Her father let Jacob have her in advance, so to speak. I don't know what the Westerners learn from this story, but to us it means that if you work long and hard, you will be rewarded. Pass with four, fail with five!"

The evening was not completed until there had been another examination, and class recitation, over more of the Bible, as well as the Babylonian Gilgamesh epic and the Iliad. Yamashita would have found it interesting, if he had had time to relax and enjoy it. Just before leaving the room, the teacher led the class in reciting the Academy's credo: "We are scholarly warriors..."

Fujii slid her pencils, books, and papers neatly into their slots in her case. Yamashita, in a hurry to catch her, crammed his materials into his backpack.

"*Komban wa,*" he spoke to her quietly but firmly.

She looked at him with a steady gaze before answering him in the same words. She did not smile.

"Which direction are you walking?"

"Towards Ueda-machi. I know. You just happen to be going in the same direction and you want to walk with me." Yamashita would have been speechless even if Fujii had given him a chance to speak. "Well, I suppose it cannot hurt. But I must tell you that I have no time for flirting. You must have as much homework as I do. Perhaps you do not want to get into Tōdai as badly as I do." She referred to Tōkyō Daigaku, Japan's pre-eminent university. She flicked a stray lock from her face, but without changing expression or moving her gaze from him. "When I get into a university, there will be plenty of time for boys. Until then, you might as well be talking to a stone *kami*." She referred to the roadside statues of gods. She sighed. "*Ikō?*"

As they left, they did not notice that Hiroko Takahashi, the girl with the little painful eyes, followed them.

"So, what is it that attracts you to me?" Fujii spoke, it seemed, without vanity, but with rather a scientific or anthropological interest.

Yamashita surprised her with his instant answer. "Your eyes," he said. Takahashi, close behind them, winced.

"My eyes!" She finally smiled. "Aren't boys usually interested in other parts of the body?"

They had reached a corner. They were separated momentarily by other people as she turned to cross. He caught Fujii by the arm. "*Sumimasen,*" he verbally humbled himself. "You have wonderful eyes. And handwriting." As Takahashi followed them across the street and listened, she thought about her own lopsided scribbles.

"My handwriting!" Fujii smiled at the heavens.

"Have you studied *shodō*?"

"No, I never took lessons. It is my natural style."

"*Hontō ne!* You are even more amazing." He had to speak over the honking of little cars and the grind of buses.

"This is my building. I live here with my sister." With her head she indicated a large concrete condominium building. Many rural students came into the city to study. "*De wa, mata ato de*..."

She was saying "See you later," but he stopped her, and spoke more directly than he had dreamed he would attempt. "Meet me," he said, using the informal verb form that was nearly rude.

She didn't need to say anything. She glanced across the street at a building, painted pink, with magenta trim. It was called "Abduction in the Seraglio." It was a *Rahbu-Hoteru,* a love hotel where couples could duck in for a few minutes of fantastic privacy. Then she looked at Yamashita tiredly. "I suppose you want to study my handwriting in that school over there."

"I was thinking of Aoki Gardens," said Yamashita.

Fujii's eyes widened. "You must be crazy," she said.

"No, I am not crazy." Now it was his turn to stare intently into her eyes. "Have you not noticed how beautiful is the early summer night? How delicious the scent of the flowers? The fresh grass, and leaves of the maples?"

"No, I have not noticed. I have been very busy." Fujii seemed to sincerely regret having missed the coming of summer. Six weeks of school remained for them, even while American students were beginning their summer vacations.

"This is a holy season," said Yamashita, "when fresh growth occurs, after the azalea blossoms and *sakura* have fallen. The soil is a holy incense. The garden is filled with gods. We can celebrate the beauty of life." Fujii was going to tell him that this was the weirdest pick-up line she ever heard, but as she looked into his eyes she did not say it. Instead he continued, "Tell your sister you will be studying after juku for about an hour. And this will be no lie. Go, now, and tell her." His heart raced, for he had not planned to move this fast. He had planned only to exchange pleasantries with her. He was becoming dizzy. "I will wait there for you, near the Buddha statue. Buddha and the *kami* will smile upon us." Like most Japanese, Yamashita had no difficulty mixing Buddhism and the worship of the Shintō *kami* together. "Will you come?" Again he used the almost crude verb form.

Fujii's eyes widened even more. "I don't know. Really. Wait for me half an hour. If I decide to come, I will come before then." She turned and ran into the building.

Yamashita noticed that a girl from his juku class was standing nearby, watching the traffic. However, he ignored her and hurried straight to the garden and sat on a stone. He was unaware of the passing of time. The full truth of his situation, his wonderful fortune, had not yet penetrated his soul. The voices of passers-by were muffled by the pines and maples.

Precisely thirty minutes later, a girl in a green uniform approached him from behind and touched his hand. Her face was in deep shadow. Silently they embraced. She had a subtle scent of powder which he had not remembered. Hand in hand they walked under the *torii,* the stone gate that was the ancient Shintō symbol of the vulva. The gravel crunched under their feet, until he led them off of the path, onto a little clearing, where tree roots snaked amidst mosses. It was visible only as the slightest gloaming. The only direct light, from a street lamp, fell upon a *dosojin,* one of the Shintō phallic statues. Crickets chirped, but it was not yet the season for lightning beetles. Foliage sweetly decayed. The air was motionless.

Immediately the girl clasped Yamashita and began to kiss him. He was surprised at the softness of her face as he kissed her cheeks and finally her lips. He was going to suggest that they remove their clothes carefully, to avoid chlorophyll stains. However, the girl pulled him down into the moss before he could do much more than loosen his belt. He could not admit to her that this was a new experience for him, and that he was astonished at the softness of a female body. He penetrated deeply into yet another mossy garden. The power of orgasm took him by surprise as well. They lay absolutely still, still conjoined, as somebody walked past on the path and pretended to not see them. He was suddenly tired, and became chilled even on this early summer night. He sat silently as the girl arose, rearranged her uniform, and walked out of the garden. "*Chotto*..." he whispered after her to wait, but she was gone.

He walked home, supremely satisfied. As he passed a bar, he saw the juku teacher laughing with other men and draining small porcelain cups of sake.

The next evening at juku, the teacher called roll as the students completed yet another examination. Fujii sat placidly and never looked at Yamashita, nor did she read the haiku poem he had written for her, a poem about mosses releasing their spores into the gentle summer night.

The teacher proceeded with the roll. "Takahashi-san."

"*Hai,*" answered the girl with the little painful eyes.

'You must take better care of your uniform. It has grass stains on it. Yamashita-san!"

"Hai," he answered.

"How often must I tell you to keep your eyes and mind from wandering! Plenty of time for that in college, *neh?*"

The students had recited hours of facts about medieval Europe and Kublai Khan, whose fleet had been destroyed by the Divine Wind (*kamikaze*) when it tried to attack Japan. When the class finished, Yamashita followed Fujii silently from the room, from the building, across the street, and to her condominium.

As she turned to leave, she said, "I will read your poem."

"You were wonderful last night," Yamashita intoned.

Fujii gave him a puzzled look, then disappeared through the door.

*

During dinner the next evening, Hanao and I reminisced about the things that we did while I lived with his family during my high school visit. Three weeks was long enough for his mother to teach me how to play the *koto*, or Japanese harp, which is very long and you pluck the strings with a plectrum. It is tuned to a Japanese scale, neither major nor minor like the pieces we sang in church. Three weeks was long enough for me to take *shodō* lessons, the precise Japanese calligraphy executed with a big brush that made the characters look sloppy.

After dinner, I bathed. Then I was ready to retire to my bedroom and read. I could hear Hanao and Akiko quietly bathing one another through the thin walls. As I walked past their bedroom door on the way to the kitchen, I saw that the door was slightly ajar. Before I could stop myself, I was looking inside. They were naked, on the bed without covers, lying quietly together. I quickly went to my room, feeling very lonely, and envious of their togetherness.

*

One morning in March we all had breakfast together. I enjoyed the fried eggs with soy sauce, over rice. I passed up the pickled radish, however. Hanao left for work. Akiko had to leave also, as she volunteered at some kind of service that delivered used household items to poorer people, who may or may not have been burakumin. I was left alone, but felt good, visiting these fine people.

Just as I was ready to leave for a walk around the neighborhood and downtown, there was a knock at the door. Without thinking, I answered it.

It was the American lawyer, who delivered the papers for the lawsuit to me.

Chapter 4

The three weeks in high school were also long enough for me to fall in love with Hanao's sister Sumiko.

Sumiko was not a beautiful girl. Many Japanese girls had big dark eyes, but Sumiko's eyes were slits. Her face was flat and round. Like most Japanese girls, she was slim and petite. Her fingers were large. Unlike the gentle voices of most Japanese girls, Sumiko squawked.

But it was impossible for me to not be drawn to Sumiko. Both she and her brother were full of questions about life in America, which they thought was some kind of dreamland, where people drove big cars and ate steaks every day. How privileged you must be, they told me, to live in a country where you can see giant sequoia trees and the Grand Canyon. Unlike her brother, Sumiko had no interest in religion.

While short answers satisfied Hanao, Sumiko always asked follow-up questions. What instrument do you play in band. The trumpet. It is a brass instrument. That was enough for Hanao. But Sumiko wanted to know how the pistons worked to produce different notes, and the difference between a trumpet and a cornet. She did some reading about it, and is the only Japanese person I have known to use the word flugelhorn, which she first pronounced *furuguru-horun*, but soon she pronounced it correctly. She was always smiling and laughing. Not giggling, but laughing as if she understood what she was laughing about. Her teeth were small but her smile was big, making her slit eyes vanish entirely when she laughed.

Just before bed, it was time for our baths. In a traditional Japanese house, you take a sponge bath on a tile floor, then sit in a tub of hot water. Everyone uses the same tub of water, but each body is already clean by the time it slips into the tub. As the guest, I got to bathe first, with Hanao. Then Sumiko and her mother took their baths. As I walked past the sliding rice paper bathroom door, I saw that it was slightly ajar. Without thinking, I looked inside and I briefly saw Sumiko naked. She was as plain naked as she was clothed. But I could not get the blurry image of her out of my mind the rest of the time I stayed in their house.

She did not act romantically toward me. But when I got on the bullet train to return to Tokyo and the Haneda Airport, heading back to America, she kissed me. Kissing was so rare in traditional Japan that actors and actresses had to be trained how to do it when they starred in western-style movies after World War Two (which the Japanese called the Greater East Asian Conflict). While no longer rare, a kiss was unusual, and I knew that it meant something, something that would eventually become clear in our exchange of letters over the next several years.

Sumiko's English handwriting was big and clumsy, though her Japanese calligraphy was elegant. She always wrote with fountain pen on onion-skin paper, so she could write long letters without a lot of postage. She said that a fountain pen, in Japan, was called *mannenhitsu*, or ten-

thousand-year pen, which means only that it has a refillable cartridge. And every third page or so she did an ink drawing, simple but perfectly expressive.

And she explained her name. The *-ko* part was pretty evident to me, a two-stroke character that meant child. But the *sumi-* character had fifteen strokes and was very complicated. It meant, she said, ink. She said her father had intended her to use ink on paper either as a writer or an artist. She must have already been an accomplished artist, I assumed. I suppose Ink Child was not a strange name for the sister of Flower Man.

We wrote letters to one another about everything except ourselves. We described beautiful or interesting places we visited and fascinating things we had learned. She told me that June was so hot and humid that "it is likely that I am steamed! If you come here in summer, you will be steamed Rice!" Once I got to hike on a trail in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, and I told her every detail. She, in turn, visited the famous moss garden and the gold pavilion (Kinkaku-ji) in Kyoto and wrote about it. And then something happened. She wrote just one little sentence: *I wished you were with me as I walked through the garden.*

This sentence electrified me, and I realized that we had been writing to one another a lot, like the best of friends. Even closer than Hanao and myself. Of course, I began to write things like that also, for example, *I thought about how much you would like to have seen* whatever it was.

We continued writing to one another all through our college days. Students such as she, but not her brother, studied very hard for college entrance exams. She failed to get into Kyoto University the first time, and spent a year in *juku*, or "cram school," studying even harder for the entrance exam than she had as a high school senior. I was the science student but she told me, from memory, that xenon was element number 54 and that it was an almost-inert gas that formed no molecular compounds with any other atoms under most natural conditions.

And then she got in. That was all that mattered. The next four years, she and the other undergrad students just goofed off. They played a lot of board games (she made a pun: bored) and had parties.

Then she wrote about how she thought about my beautiful smile.

Your beautiful smile.

Whether this indicator of affection on her part was simply something I'd not noticed before, or was a significant change, or was just the result of daydreaming instead of going to class to study xenon I did not know.

And then she sent me her photograph. She was dressed in an elegant kimono, her hair was coiffed as I had never seen it, and she wore silk-finished *geta* shoes. She told me it was her *o-miai* photo, which is the photo that matchmakers use to find prospective husbands. I assumed it was an extra photo, since she, not the matchmaker, had sent it to me.

But I began thinking, after the crash of yet another college romance, about whether I could ever go to Japan, or she could come to America, and whether… Well, there was only one way to find out, short of going to Japan, which was too expensive for me. I would write to her and ask her what her feelings were. *Do you love me?* It took several days before I could write

those words. *And, if you do,* I wrote, *maybe I can come to visit you* and we can decide whether anything could come of our mutual attraction. I mailed the letter.

I then got a letter back from her. The first eight pages were effusive, as always. She wrote, here is the postman! He has just brought a letter from you. Then, at the top of page nine, she became very serious. She said that, yes, in fact, she was in love with me. But, after thinking about it, she realized that the distance was just too great for us to get together and even figure out whether we could be a couple. Neither of our families had enough money for this.

From that point on, over the next decade, our letters were friendly but formal.

Then she was accepted into the inaugural class of a prestigious business graduate program. She was one of only two women in the class. She sent me photos of her speeches and interviews. I wrote back, sharing her enthusiasm. I was in graduate school myself by that time.

Then she stopped writing. Wondering if anything had happened to her, I wrote to her graduate program office. They wrote back to me and said Sumiko had left the program and gotten married. They even sent me her new address and name. Her last name was now Heike, which is an important name in Japanese history. Heike was one of the prominent families in early medieval Japan. I wrote to her and congratulated her on her marriage and wished her every possible happiness.

Her last letter to me ended, *Please forget about me.*

Hanao confirmed in a letter to me that Sumiko had indeed married into one of the most prestigious families in Japan. He also said it is customary in traditional families for women to no longer communicate with male friends after marriage, even when no romance was involved. He knew all about my relationship-by-mail with Sumiko. And he confirmed that, yes, I should forget about her, and just be thankful for the friendship God had given us in the past.

Chapter 5

"That story about the girls in the juku," I told Hanao the next time we gathered to share stories, "was really sensuous. I am surprised. You being religious and all."

"But the original story in the Bible is very sensuous," said Hanao. "Well, Kome-san, are you ready to share a story with us?"

Akiko smiled her encouragement.

"I am," I said, unfolding a printed manuscript called *The Attic War*. "This story might explain how I first became interested in Japan. You see, it really happened. The characters—my father, little sister, grandmother, even my great uncle Will—were or are real people.

"The letters from the Japanese girl to Uncle Will remind me a lot of the letters that Sumiko wrote to me," I said. "But Sumiko and I had not yet met, and the letters were not yet written."

THE ATTIC WAR

"No one has been in here for years," said Dad as he climbed the stepladder and pushed open the trap door of the attic. A silent cascade of scent—dust, mold, and wood—wafted down upon me.

Grandma was in the living room watching a World War II documentary. She remembered the original newsreels—black and white films of airplanes flying over the Pacific and bombing Japanese encampments on distant Pacific islands. Grandma did not notice as my little sister flew paper airplanes about the room, imitating the sounds of explosions and gunfire.

"You coming, Leslie?" Dad called down to her.

"Oh, yeah." She let her paper airplane crash as she ran to the stepladder beside me. Grandma did not stir.

"Hand me the broom and trashcan." I gave Dad a short broom with yellow plastic bristles, and he threw it like a javelin through the hole, then he placed the plastic trashcan just inside the door.

Dad reached his hands through the opening and slowly raised his head into the attic. He looked around like a Marine from a foxhole. A dust mask hung from his neck. He carefully launched himself in, sitting on the edge. "Now be careful in here," his distant voice said, his shoes dangling before my eyes. When I climbed in, I saw him standing tall above me, his head nearly touching the roof. I turned back to reach for Leslie's raised arms, and lifted her in.

"Gross," Leslie announced, coughing. Dust blanketed the neatly stacked piles of boxes.

"Step only on the beams," Dad told her. "And stay away from his part right here," he indicated a region off to his right. "The beams are cracked here. We'll have to have this repaired before we put the house on the market." He crouched and spoke quietly to us. "When Grandma goes to the Home, we'll have to throw out most of this stuff, and store the rest. We don't have room for any of it back in Minnesota."

"What exactly are we going to do?" I asked him.

"We've got to sweep up all of the dust. Then we have to find out what is in each box, and decide what to do with it." He crouched to retrieve the broom. "Stay back from this dust," he announced as he slid the mask over his nose and mouth. He began sweeping dust from boxes into the trashcan. The broom handle kept colliding with the piles of boxes. "I wonder where all this dust came from," his muffled voice announced.

Leslie reached over to a box and scraped away some dust. The box had a label: Newspapers 1952-1955. Leslie and I began brushing dust away from several more boxes. Each was neatly labeled.

"Dad, guess what," I announced. "Each box..."

"I see!" Dad smiled, having removed his mask. He was looking at the labels on the boxes. "Mostly old newspapers and magazines. If the local Historical Society doesn't want them, we recycle them."

"What's this box? It's just labeled 'Will.'"

"Oh!" Dad was interested. "Her brother, your great uncle. He died in World War II. Actually, everybody thought the war was over, and they let down their guard. A sniper shot him as the army advanced on Berlin. Go ahead and look through it."

Leslie slouched and looked around listlessly as I lifted the box to the floor and slid the cover off. "Grandma won't want to lose these," I said, holding up letters from Corporal W. Hicks to his sister Stella. Dad nodded in agreement as he began writing in a pocket notebook.

I opened a manila folder and found pencil sketches on brittle yellowed paper. Dad's voice called over, "I see you found some of Will's artwork." They were carefully etched, by a man who had much but undeveloped talent. Each one was of a Japanese temple or house, with trees and rock gardens. Each sketch had a Japanese woman in a kimono. Her face was always hidden, either because her back was turned or because she was very small in the corner.

"How odd," I said. Leslie stirred and looked at the drawings, then slouched back. "We were at war with Japan at the time Will made these drawings." I found several books: one was called *The Next Hundred Years,* another was a collection of Sherlock Holmes stories, and others gave instruction in art. Then I found a packet of letters, tied with a black silk band.

"Will had a fascination for Japan," Dad explained as he continued writing in his notebook. "It was somewhat scandalous to the family, actually. When he was a student at UCLA, before the War, he developed a friendship with a Japanese girl. The family wasn't very pleased with this, but tolerated it, even when he brought the girl over to the house for dinner. She went back to Japan without graduating."

"Asako Yamamoto," I said, reading the return address on one of the letters, posted from Japan.

"You found some letters from her? Wonderful!" He did not look up as he continued working his way towards the back of the attic, noting the contents of each carefully labeled box.

"Ooh," exclaimed Leslie. "This label says Toys!" She struggled to slide the box onto the floor of the attic.

The black silk band around the letters practically disintegrated in my fingers. I removed one envelope, dated 10.VII.41. I slipped the onionskin sheaf from the envelope. When I began to unfold it, it fractured. I drew it close to my face and peered inside. "To Will, the best friend of mine," announced the bold strokes of a fountain pen.

> *How are you? I am very well. But Japanese summer is very hot. It is likely that I am steamed! In summer, monsoon rain come from the south almost every day. I remember cool breeze from ocean in Los Angeles. You can see fire flies along stream that runs in front of my house.*

"Ooh, look at this!" Leslie lifted a model airplane from the box, an old propeller biplane. She began to fly it around, carefully and quietly.

"Aha! I found out why there is so much dust in here!" Dad peered behind the last stack of boxes, into a small niche from which light diffused. "There's an uncovered louvre here. The wind can blow right in. I guess that's okay in southern California. Omigosh!" He jumped back.

"What is it?" I looked up from the letter.

"Black widow spiders."

I walked over, still holding the letter. Leslie followed silently at first, then with a low rumbling, maneuvering the model airplane. Cobwebs covered the louvre, silken in the light, with spherical egg cases like nebulae. I looked into the obscurity surrounding the louvre. When my eyes adjusted, I saw black spiders with enormous abdomens, motionless in the webs.

"Leslie, stay away. These spiders are poisonous." He said to me, "They must live off of insects that fly in through the louvre. Well, I'm going to have to get rid of them somehow. They won't jump on you, but don't brush against the webs. We can't have them here when people look at the house."

I sat down on a box, after checking it for spiders, and looked at another page of the letter.

> *At least once a time I think you and I feel you. I wonder how you are getting along these days. These days I feel God. It is owed to you. If I have a chance to talk with you and to pray to God beside you, it is sure I feel God as himself. My happiness is on your love. I hope your*

> *happiness. I hope the most wonderful day when we meet again will come soon.*

As I sat, images began to form in my mind: I could hear the stream, see the fireflies, feel a gentle breeze in a garden. The dust that floated in the attic became mist and rain.

"I think I'll just have to kill them with this broom," announced Dad, as he wiped gritty sweat from his brow.

"Lieutenant Leslie at your command, sir." Leslie began flying her airplane near Dad.

"Well, here goes."

I continued to read, on the last page.

> *There is talk of war. I am much frightened. I read of war when we were in college. War is such an ugly thing. Our books told of glory, when your cowboys killed your Indians. And even now, our news tells of the glory of our triumph in Manchukuo. But it is all ugly. Did you read me in your Bible about love? It is the one value thing in the world. And if your country and my country fight, and our leaders tell us we are enemies, I cannot believe to live. They tell me I should not to write to American. I hope this letter reach you. It contain my kiss.*

It was signed "Asako, your child of morning." Many Japanese women have names ending in -ko, or child. In my mind, it was morning, a round red sun rising in the mist over tiled roofs. Silence muffled the village below, but the defiant red sun tried to burn away the mists and stir up the villagers into *Yamato damashii,* the conquering spirit of Japan.

Leslie's airplane flew in erratic and noisy circles behind Dad as he raised the broom and struck one of the spiders, leaving a smudge of guts as the spider fell into the dust. Leslie made sounds of explosions and gunfire. "A successful strike, Captain Dad," she called out. "Let's wipe out the enemy!"

"Enemy at two o'clock," said Dad, eyeing another spider to his right. Leslie's airplane circled loudly and impatiently.

I could see little nuclei materialize in the distant mists and become a formation of airplanes. They approached the village. The villagers looked up, then scurried for cover. A small child ran out and its mother dashed out to rescue her. At that moment a bomb crater appeared right where they had been, followed a second later by a loud explosive sound made by Leslie. Dad's broom struck another spider.

"Enemy at twelve o'clock trying to get away," said Dad as he struck a spider scurrying up the wall. Leslie's imitation of a machine gun rang among the tile roofs. One of the old wooden buildings sprang into a sudden orange flame and ejected its people, helplessly strafed by the spitfire from Leslie's plane. Smoke and mist cast a dusty pall over the villagers as Leslie's airplane chased them through the passageways between the boxes. "Got another one," said Dad, with a whack.

"Chasing the enemy through the streets, Captain," reported Leslie between bursts of percussive explosions. I could see people dancing amidst flames, with nowhere to run for

relief, collapsing, pouring their ghosts into the smoke. Their atoms screamed in the glowing incandescent cinders that rose like silent fireflies amidst the buzz of the retreating wasps. I saw a roof collapse, annihilating whole families and traditions and scorching a trunk that contained letters from an American, letters destroyed by spontaneous combustion within. "Die, die!" called out Leslie.

"Last one, I think," said Dad. He swept spider cadavers into dust piles, which he scooped into the trashcan. "Good job, Lieutenant," he said as Leslie landed her plane. "The enemy has been vanquished."

"That was better than a computer game," said Leslie.

I carefully slid the letter back into its envelope, and fingered through other letters, silently. The next thing I noticed was when Dad called back up to me through the trap door.

"Are you okay?" he asked me.

"Sure, I'm fine," I lied.

"Hand down the box with Will's old stuff in it."

I placed the letters in the box and closed it. The last letter in the packet had never been opened.

*

After I finished reading the story, Hanao said, "American experiences of the Greater East Asian Conflict were quite different from those of the Japanese. The war eventually came to Japanese soil. And the war ended when two atomic bombs exploded, the first over Hiroshima, the second over Nagasaki. I have no intention of discussing them with you."

"I would not engage in such a discussion," I said. "Those days are long gone."

"God be praised," said Hanao. "The war was never actually on American soil."

"Except for the bombing of Pearl Harbor," I said. "I have no intention of discussing this with you."

"I would not engage in such a discussion," Hanao said. "Those days are long gone."

We looked at one another and laughed.

"But there is something that you probably don't know about. Most Americans don't know about it either. Actually the Pacific war *did* come to American soil," I said.

"I have never heard about this," said Hanao.

"Nor have I," said Akiko.

"I wrote this story about it," I said. I pulled out a manuscript of *Balloons*, and began to read it.

BALLOONS

"You can't be serious! You absolutely cannot mean this!" Jack's father was fairly screaming at him. "She's Japanese!"

"She's Japanese-American. She was born here." Jack stood his ground but could not look his father in the eye.

"She's Japanese!" Jack's father waved his arms in exasperation.

"She's a second generation American citizen. She's *nisei*."

"Don't use that language around me!" Jack's father was hoarse.

"The war is *over*, Dad. They're our friends now. I mean, even the Japanese in Japan. Truman's even talking about them helping us out against the Communists..." Jack had prepared his arguments, but was unable to present them quickly enough.

"Do you know what they did to us?" his father interrupted him.

"Dad, of course I know!" Jack did not think he had to remind his father he was in high school when the war had ended two years earlier. "I listened to the news with you every night, remember?"

Jack's father was particularly zealous about the Second World War, because he had not fought in it and tried to compensate for his civilian status. "Do you know what they did to *us?* Not just the soldiers, but to us here at home?"

This statement stumped Jack. He wondered if his father referred to something that had happened at one of the internment camps where the Japanese-Americans had been kept during the war. Maybe he meant the radio broadcasts by Tokyo Rose. He had to think of something to say quickly. "Leslie didn't do anything to hurt us here at home..."

"Maybe not, but she, her family, all of them, were ready to turn against us the moment our soil was successfully attacked by the Empire of Japan." Jack's father had calmed a little, preparing to tell a story.

"They never attacked the United States itself, they never even got close!" responded Jack.

"How do you know?" Jack's father smiled, holding his trump card.

"As I said, I listened to the news with you..."

"I'll tell you about something that wasn't *on* the news." Jack's father raised his eyebrows above his horn-rimmed glasses. He had given something of himself in the war; long hours of perusing numbers in poor light had damaged his eyesight. "Balloon-bombs."

Jack was speechless. His father motioned him to a chair, and began his story.

The Allies ruled the lower atmosphere in 1943. Ever since Midway, the Japanese planes had no chance of approaching the mainland United States, or even Hawaii. Their atmospheric scientists, however, knew that there was much more to the atmosphere than just the troposphere in which airplanes flew. They discovered the jet stream in the stratosphere. No planes could fly so high, but balloons could; and the jet stream poured right across the Pacific Ocean, from Japan to America. On a peninsula on the Pacific side of Honshu, the Japanese built balloons that carried bombs. They had machinery that dropped ballast whenever the balloon began to sink, causing it to rise again into the jet stream, but

would run out of ballast about the time the balloon was scheduled to reach America. It would then sink and detonate. Already starved for resources, the Japanese—the women and children in the factory—did not use precious fabrics that could otherwise be used for parachutes. Instead they made the balloons from rice paper. Surprising even the Japanese, many of the balloons made the entire trans-Pacific journey and came to rest in North America—most of them in the desert beyond the coastal civilization of California, Oregon, and Washington. Some had exploded, some had not. The U.S. government strictly forbade newspapers from publishing accounts of, and law enforcement agencies from telling civilians about, these balloons.

"But I saw one," said Jack's father. "It was quite beautiful, shimmering in the sky as it flew eastward into the desert. I didn't know what it was. Smitty told me about it at work, after the war."

Smitty was actually Schmidt, a neighbor who had spent the war as an American soldier stationed at Camp Roberts in California. Jack did not say what he thought, about Schmidt being a second-generation German and being allowed in the army, while second-generation Japanese were herded into internment camps. Jack didn't want to start another discussion about internment camps; he already knew his father would say that they were much nicer places than the POW camps that the Japanese ran in Asia, and he already agreed.

Instead Jack said, "What's this got to do with Leslie?"

Now his father became angry again. "If I hear her name again..."

"Leslie!" Jack shouted before thinking.

"...then you'd better find your own place to live," Jack's father finished.

"Maybe it's about time I should be doing that anyway," mumbled Jack, who was nineteen.

Later that night, Jack walked in the first rain of the autumn in the dry hills of central California. The rain was just light and warm enough to make him feel clean. He wondered if his action had been rash, getting himself kicked out of the house on account of a girl who was his friend but who might, Jack could not forget, not feel any love for him. Despite being cast adrift, he felt elation at his new freedom. He still had a few days to find a job and an apartment. His father had always said there was a price to pay for freedom. He had meant the price of soldiers' blood, but Jack now applied the maxim to himself, not to the extent of shedding his own blood, but he was shedding his own life. He leapt into the air, and shouted *Hallelujah!*

Jack had met Leslie years before, in high school, but had forgotten her when she and her family disappeared into the internment camps, where she completed high school. Her diploma was legal but was not recognized by most employers, and she worked in her father's grocery store. Jack met her again when he was riding his bicycle out in the country, and she was riding hers in the opposite direction. She was the only person he had met who, besides himself, enjoyed riding a bicycle in the country just to enjoy the beauty of the natural world. They agreed to meet again, to ride their bicycles together.

One time they stopped at a little creek, on the banks of which abundant early summer wildflowers grew. Neither of them knew very much about nature, and they

certainly had no idea what the flowers were, but Leslie had learned traditional Japanese flower arranging from her mother. She created an exquisite bouquet, which she placed in the trunk of an oak overhanging the creek. Jack had not told his father he was bicycling *with* anyone, but one of his father's friends had seen them. Jack's father had forbidden him to ever go bicycling with Leslie again. But now, he was free. He could go bicycling with Leslie whenever he wished, or whenever his employer would allow him.

Jack had no hesitation in choosing an employer. He went straight to the grocery store owned by Leslie's father. The store was more American than most American stores, even though it had a little Asian section. Leslie's father tried to be as American as possible, giving his daughter a name no non-American Japanese could pronounce. Leslie saw Jack and ran to greet him. Jack did not have time to tell her what had happened, and was astounded when he asked her father for work. Leslie's father, an *issei* who had come to America in the 1920's, was just American enough to know how to say no, and Japanese enough to say he would try to think of something. Before leaving, Jack arranged to meet Leslie.

"You did *that* for *me*?" Leslie sat on the lowest branch of the oak tree at the creek. The flower arrangement from the previous week was still there but had dried. The wind had combed the petals from the wild flax and shriveled the penstemons, but the wild barley stems had blushed a pinkish gold and turned their heads inland in the afternoon sea breeze. She spoke quietly, for this stream, and the adjacent field, was the private property of a man whose lands were so extensive that he would not notice these two intruders—but, one could never be sure. Their bicycles were hidden in the brambles. When Jack nodded, Leslie asked, "Why?" She threw her straight short black hair back with an uncomfortable toss of her head, but her bangs still fell into her dark eyes.

"Because, I cannot let my father tell me that I cannot be your friend. And, well, there's more." Leslie looked at Jack steadily, but he did not look at her. "I thought that, maybe, you might like me as more than just a friend." He struggled to think of what to say next, but before he spoke, Leslie stood up and sat beside him, pressing her shoulder against his. When Jack turned to look at her, she grabbed his face with her hands and kissed him. She didn't stop kissing Jack for a long time.

Finally Jack pulled his face away, with a sweaty slurping sound, from Leslie's hands, and stood up to look at her. She sat, slim and elegant, in a plain cotton dress. She shrugged and smiled with a natural gracefulness. Jack leapt into the air, brushing his hands against the oak leaves. "This is too good! This is too perfect! This is..." His parents weren't particularly religious, and had never sent him to Sunday school. But at this moment he felt like he believed in God. At least, he felt ballooned by a spiritual exuberance. He ran out into the field and leapt into the air, calling out *Hallelujah!*

When Jack came back down to earth, his feet touched what appeared to be a pile of scrap metal. An explosion obliterated him. Leslie ran quickly, past the twisted pieces of metal hidden in the grass just turning brown, and saw Jack's blood on the rice paper that had been matted down by only a few years of rain.

Chapter 6

One evening, after yet another simple but elegant dinner that Hanao and I had helped to make, we all sat together around the *kotatsu*, the little table near the floor. Hanao and Akiko were sharing little smiles. I waited for them to tell me what they were smiling about.

"We just got confirmation today," said Hanao. Akiko looked down and smiled grandly when Hanao continued, "Akiko and I are soon to be parents."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" My enthusiasm was unfeigned, for I had begun to forget about my own troubles and think about their happiness every day. "Boy or girl? Or do you know?"

"We do not want to know," said Hanao. "We want to prepare the same way for either a boy or a girl *akachan*." This was the generic Japanese word for, roughly, *little red thing*, a baby.

"I have already written a story to read to it once it begins language," said Akiko.

"It will be quite a while," said Hanao, "but there is no need for us to wait until the child is speaking before we can enjoy the story."

"I can read to you the story," said Akiko, before I had a chance to invite her to do so. She had brought out the story, written in ink but without the kinds of drawings that Sumiko would have included. Maybe she could ask Sumiko to do drawings for the book, even if they would never be seen by anyone except her little niece or nephew? "It is based on English story," she said.

Akiko cleared her throat. "It is called, *The Multicolored Shakuhachi Player of Hamarin Village*." She looked at her husband, the shakuhachi player, who went to the closet to get his instrument.

THE MULTICOLORED SHAKUHACHI PLAYER OF HAMARIN VILLAGE

"In Hamarin Village," Akiko read. "All the men worked in business offices in the nearby city. They were gone all day, and late into the evening every day. But the men had left babies with their wives. As the babies grew up, they hardly knew their fathers.

"Then one day, a man came into the village. He was wearing a kimono of many colors. And instead of a sword in his sash, he carried a shakuhachi. The children all gathered around him as he played delightful tunes for them."

Akiko looked at Hanao. "That's your cue."

Hanao played a happy tune. He said it was *Hamabe no Uta*, or Song of the Seashore.

"Then he played another one," read Akiko.

Hanao played the same tune again. He apologized, “So sorry. I know only one happy tune. Most Japanese folk songs,” he explained to me, “are in the minor mode. Very beautiful, but nothing that would depict a kid playing in the sand and the waves. Even the most famous Japanese song, *Sakura*, about cherry blossoms, is in minor.” He almost said chelly brossom, but had trained himself well in English pronunciation. He played the tune. He continued, “The most beautiful of all is *Kōjō no Ts’ki,* or moon over the old castle, but you can bet the melody is in minor.” He played it. “Or how about *Its’ki no Komori Uta*, the lullaby of Itsuki?” He played it. Then he played *Nambu Ushi-Oi Uta,* the cow-chasing (cowboy) song of Nambu. “The lullaby and the cowboy song are almost depressing. Right. I guess, before our kid gets old enough to understand stories, I’d better learn some happy songs. *Kompira Fune-fune,* a little kid song about boats, isn’t so bad.”

Akiko cleared her throat and continued reading.

“The children wanted to play games. It was summer and the sakura were finished blooming, but it was not yet the Golden Holiday season, so they had to stay home. So he play many happy songs for the children, and they dance around and laugh. Then one of the children said, I wish this man was my *otōsan*.” Akiko looked up and said, “That means, daddy. It is formal: the honorable father person. We don’t have an informal term, unless it is the imitation of the English dada. Now, there are lots of diminutives for *okaasan*, mother: *chichi, haha,* and others. But, traditionally, the father is seen as aloof, hard to approach.”

“That’s not the kind of daddy I’m going to be,” grinned Hanao.

Akiko continued reading.

“The man had colorful flowers stuffed in his hidden pockets.” Akiko explained, “We have pockets in the long sleeves of our kimonos.” She resumed reading. “He took them out—lilies, irises, sunflowers, azaleas—which he had picked along the roadside or from branches that hung over the walls of village gardens. He handed one to each child. The *kodomo* jumped up and down in delight.

“Then the shakuhachi player began to lead the children out of the village and toward the mountain. Some of the mothers went with them. The fathers came home late that night and found all of their children, and many of their wives, gone.” Akiko looked up and said, “The Flower Man took them away.”

Hanao began to play another melody, also in minor. “Oh, that’s *soran-bushi*,” said Akiko. “Let’s dance to it.” She got up, touched my hand and I also got up. Hanao began to lead us in a circle, swinging his flute side to side. Akiko pretended by be pulling on something in the middle of the circle, and I imitated her. “This is the song of the fishermen pulling in their nets.” Then Hanao began to play *tanko-bushi*, the song of the coal miners. It had a distinctly jazz beat to it, and we swayed around to the syncopations. Akiko swung her arms in the air and snapped her fingers. At the end of the melodic line, there were two repeated notes, to which we stomped.

"I haven't had this much fun in a while," said Akiko, breathing hard.

And I won't have this much fun again for a while, I thought.

*

I checked my college email and found a message from my old acquaintance Ben Buta. When we were in high school, he was always arrogant. He was a little chubby. He ridiculed me a lot, though he assured me it was just meant as fun. I don't know how he found out I was in Japan, since the reason he contacted me was that he had a business meeting in Japan—in Nara, a city right next to Ono, as a matter of fact. As part of a mass mailout, he had contacted the Nara Chamber of Commerce. Since he was already traveling in Japan, they invited him to present his ideas about municipal lawn care equipment over lunch. He would travel at his own expense, of course, though the lunch was free. He invited me along. It puzzled me that they would want to hear from him, because Japanese cities seldom had large lawns.

I soon found out the reason.

An acquaintance of Hanao's, a man named Miki, who spoke a little English, sat with us. He whispered to me, "Is his name really Ben Buta?" I confirmed that it was.

Apparently Ben was so unacquainted with Japanese food that he did not know what wasabi was. (It is green, very hot horseradish sauce.) Miki pointed to it and said, "Try some of this. Japanese specialty. Lime cream."

Ben spooned up the whole thing and stuck it in his mouth. He spent the rest of the meal pretending that he was not in pain, and drinking water, which helped to wash the heat away from his mouth and throat but did nothing for the pain that had already reached deeply into his nasal passages.

Ben then got up to the podium and spoke mostly in English, just assuming his hosts would understand him. They made a video-recording of his presentation. He began by saying the only Japanese sentence he had bothered to look up.

"*Wata-kushi wa Ben Buta desu,"* he said proudly, saying "de-soo." If he had studied Japanese, he would have known to say *watakush'*, emphasizing the second syllable, and *des'*, leaving off the final vowel.

After his presentation, Ben excused himself to leave, and I started to go with him. But Miki urged me to remain. The Chamber was going to review Ben's video and discuss it. "They have to review the subtitles," Miki said to Ben, who acknowledged that this was a good sign. The president started to play back Ben's video on the monitor as he left. Artificial intelligence had generated automatic translations which appeared on the screen. This was mostly from English into Japanese. But it translated Ben's first sentence from Japanese into English.

When, in the recording, Ben said, "Wata-kushi wa," the subtitle simply said "I."

When Ben said, "Ben Buta," the subtitles read, after leaving a little space, "shit lard-ass."

There was total silence in the room.

When Ben said, "desoo," the subtitles inserted into the space, "am."

The president of the Chamber then stopped the video and asked if there were any comments.

Everyone in the room erupted into a simultaneous explosion of laughter, which went on for at least a minute. When the president asked if there was any interest in seeing the rest of the video, no one said yes.

The president then played a video recording of an American television advertisement for butter. The video showed cows grazing in mountain meadows in the American west. The sound track said,

Gentle western cows
Take your own sweet time
In the gentle western sunshine
In the sweet and tender grass
Making butter—butter—

Many of the men were singing along, *Bataa, Bataa!* And laughing wildly.

I did not understand this at all until Hanao explained it to me that evening.

"The Japanese do not like butter," he said. "They think it stinks."

"But, it doesn't," I said.

"Actually, it does. Smell closely next time you eat some butter, which you will not be doing in our household."

"*Iie*," said Akiko. No.

"You have to start with slightly aged cream when you make butter," said Hanao. "Otherwise, when you churn it, you just get a hard version of whipped cream. The butter scent comes from a chemical called diacetyl produced by bacteria.

"Japanese love fermented radishes, but not fermented milk," continued Hanao. "Certainly not cheese. Certainly not the ripe cheeses they have in France. A French *fromagerie* is a Japanese image of hell. Anyway, a slang insult from a bygone era that Japanese used for westerners is *bataa-k'sai,* butter-stinkers."

I thought about it for a moment, then smiled. "Ben deserved that," I said.

"Also," said Hanao, "right at the moment Japan is not in a strong financial position relative to the United States. But, depending on international situation, that could change rapidly. Some of our businessmen—such as Heike-san—dream of having Americans grazing contentedly and producing things for our benefit, like cows in a pasture."

"Sounds like they want us to suffer," I said.

"Not at all!" smiled Hanao. "Those cows in the advertisement you saw. They were happy, *neh*."

Chapter 7

Japan had been the bloodthirsty enemy of America in the Second World War. They had considered themselves, and their Emperor, invincible. When Emperor Hirohito broadcast the surrender to the Japanese people on the radio, telling them they had to accept the unacceptable, the Japanese people expected newly-arrived American soldiers to go on a campaign of rape and pillage and slaughter. That is, after all, what Japanese soldiers had done in Shanghai and many other cities in China when they invaded in the 1930s. When American soldiers entered Japan, under General Douglas MacArthur, the Japanese had hidden away their women.

But when they discovered that the Allied soldiers did not rape or steal or murder, the Japanese were astonished. Their hatred quickly turned to love. Some of them even loved General MacArthur. When the rumor got started that MacArthur was considering a run for the American presidency, one Japanese business put up a big sign saying, *We Play for Your Erection.* This is probably not quite true, but something of that kind happened. The Japanese women flocked to the American soldiers and clung to them in the parks and brothels and bath houses. When General MacArthur shut down the informal system of brothels, the American soldiers still did not rape and pillage. When the Americans wrote a new constitution for Japan, the Japanese leaders saw that they had gotten a pretty good deal for a conquered country—except, of course, for the two atomic bombs.

And for the next seventy years, Japan and America were very close, except for tensions caused by the incredible growth of Japanese industrial output which flooded American markets. At first, "Made in Japan" was a mark of shoddy work. But hardly three decades had passed before Japanese electronic products were among the best in the world. Economic growth in the late 1980s was so rapid that nobody could believe it was happening. They called it the "bubble economy" because it looked like it would have to burst at some point like a bubble drying in the sun.

Article IX of the Japanese constitution, written by Americans and modified only slightly by the Japanese, specifically prohibited Japan from having an army capable of overseas operations. "The Japanese people forever renounce war," it read. The American government did not want any more Bataan Death Marches or Pearl Harbors. Most Japanese did not greatly complain about this, however; they got American military protection without having to pay for it, except for war reparations. In particular, the Soviet Union, some of whose islands were only a few miles away from northern Japan, and then Red China, could easily have overrun Japan, were it not for the protection of the United States. Communist North Korea was very close, also, but it was a black hole from which almost nothing issued. A few Japanese did resent American domination, such as the author of the book *Nō to ieru Nihon* (The Japan that Can Say No), but for the most part the Japanese decided to stay quiet and safe.

Japan did, however, have a Self-Defense Force that was ready to act in case another country invaded it or, in early twenty-first century interpretations, to aid their allies against such invasions. With over a quarter million active personnel, and an annual budget of almost seven trillion yen (over fifty billion dollars), it was a big operation. They conducted numerous drills to defend minor Japanese islands from invasion.

Most people in Japan did not seriously believe that another country would invade them. But the Chinese regularly sent big military ships through Japanese waters. When Vladimir Putin invaded the Ukraine, Japan quickly realized that Russia could be a threat also. And North Korea? It was far across the Sea of Japan. All North Korea could do was launch missiles into the sea, which sometimes worked. But there was always the menace of Russia and from Vladimir Putin, who seemed to think himself the new Joseph Stalin. An increasing number of Japanese citizens began to believe that crossing their fingers and burning incense at shrines would not be enough to protect them from invaders. They could, however, rely on the United States.

Or could they? When the second Trump administration began to criticize the Ukraine and NATO, becoming inexplicably friendly toward Vladimir Putin, many Japanese began to think that Japan had to take its defense, entirely or almost so, into its own hands. This was the same thing that the European Union began to think about its own defense.

The situation became even more urgent when Donald Trump started referring to Canada, right away in his second term, as “the fifty first state.” Then, in March 2025, he declared that the border between the United States and Canada was “an artificial line.” A little more than a year later, after annexation negotiations with Canada failed, Trump ordered “United States peacekeeping forces” over the border into Alberta. They annexed part of the pipeline that delivers “oil that rightfully belongs to the United States.”

What Japan needed was not a new government bureau and bureaucrats, but a rich and powerful leader from the world of business and technology, someone who was willing to build lots of advanced weapons using artificial intelligence to respond instantly and precisely to threats of invasion. A leader who was willing to tell Donald Trump that Japan would make its own decisions about how to defend itself. Such a leader was Minoru Heike.

Hanao’s brother-in-law.

Chapter 8

"I need to talk to you sometime about Heike-san," Hanao told me.

"What about Sumiko?" I asked him.

"Not her," said Hanao. "I never hear from her. But about her husband, from whom I also never hear.

"I am sure you have seen his picture," continued Hanao.

"Not that I recall," I said.

"He has a very dramatic face," Hanao said of his brother-in-law. "Big eyebrows, big teeth, and a big smile that could be menacing or friendly, depending on how you look at it. Short hair."

"Maybe I have seen his picture."

"Minoru Heike is the president and chief executive officer and chief operating officer and Lord High Everything Else of the biggest supplier of defense equipment to the Japanese government. Now in some corporations," continued Hanao, "as I well know, the president is mostly just the man who can drink the most and puke the least. But Heike-san, no two ways about it, is a genius. His company is Bakufu, which refers to the military officials who, back in feudal times, dictated to the Emperor everything he was supposed to say and do. And that is more or less what Heike-san is doing now."

"Wow," I said. "You just came right out and said it."

"I know the man," said Hanao. "If you repeat any of this, I will deny it. Unless I have my hand on a Bible, of course. Heike-san pretty much tells the Prime Minister what to do. And the Emperor? Ever since the Greater East Asia Conflict, the Emperor has had very little authority. The diet and prime minister run the show. In the feudal period, the shōgun and the samurai made all the decisions. But today, Heike-san can pretty much do as he pleases. Nobody can stop him. Of course, he is careful to not antagonize anyone.

"Part of what he does is to manufacture the best weapons in the world. Not the best weapons systems—Japan is too small to have a *system* like that of America. But he makes drones that can deliver what he calls payloads—using the English word—via evasive maneuvers to precise destinations, which are, to the victims, unpredictable. Heike-san designed the weapons, and the payloads, himself.

"Heike-san keeps referring back to the days of the Japanese Empire, before World War Two. The Empire annexed Korea (renaming it *Chosen*) and Manchuria (renaming it *Manchukuo*) long before America was paying attention to Japan. America wasn't even paying much attention to Hitler, much less the military government that told Emperor Hirohito what to do. Heike-san doesn't actually say Japan should form an empire again, but he doesn't say we shouldn't, either. He never tries to actually *tell* the prime minister and Diet what to do, but they know to let him have his way unless there is a good and clear reason to oppose him. Which hasn't happened yet.

"He did a test strike on one of our little uninhabited islands, with results that impressed both the Self-Defense Force and the Americans. Not using a real payload, of course.

"Heike-san has started a popular group which he calls the Japan Glory movement. It has thousands of members—not millions, just thousands—who meet and sing patriotic songs and wave a flag that is eerily similar to the pre-War Japanese flag. Today's Japanese flag has one red circle in a white background, but before the war it had red rays coming from the Rising Sun. That's what the Japan Glory flag is like.

"Let's just say that I am glad that we are in his family."

"I suppose that means we will have dinner with him sometime," I said.

"No. He is way too busy. He was too busy before, and now that you have come, he probably doesn't want Sumiko to see you again."

Chapter 9

"You need something to write about," said Hanao. "When you turn in your report for your money. What have you got so far?"

"Things I've seen walking around," I said. "Gardens. The crowded neighborhoods. Things like that. Oh, and your stories about how the businessmen get drunk every night."

"That's all been written," said Hanao.

"And about the mountainside forests around here," I said. "The leaves are just coming out—I think they are beech trees—and there is still plenty of sunlight for the azalea and magnolia bushes to be in full bloom."

"I hope you got some nice photos."

"I did."

"What I have in mind will give you something to write about, if you're up to it."

"What is it?"

"What is the first thing you think of when you think of Japan?" Hanao asked.

"Fuji, I suppose," I answered. "Mt. Fuji-yama san."

"Don't call it that," Hanao said. "Mount, and yama, and san all mean *mountain*." He found a piece of paper and wrote a simple pictograph on it, with three vertical lines. "This means mountain."

"I can see that."

"The indigenous *kun* Japanese pronunciation is *yama*. But each character also has an *on* Chinese pronunciation, or as close as we can get to Chinese. It is *san*. Means the same thing."

"How did that get started? Having two pronunciations for the same character."

"It began when the Chinese characters were imported about twelve hundred years ago. At the time, the Japanese language had no writing. Chinese is a monosyllabic language, but Japanese is not. So we ended up with a Chinese one-syllable, and a Japanese multi-syllable, pronunciation for each character. Chinese writing, and Japanese speech, do not fit one another. But the scholars *forced* them to fit. The dictionary is full of other examples. *Jin* is person, and so is *hito*." It sounded like *h'to.* "We even have two different ways of counting, one from Chinese (*ichi, ni, san, shi, go*) and one from Japanese (*hitots', futats', mitts', yotts', itsuts'*).

"To this day, the Chinese pronunciation, favored in previous centuries by scholars, has greater status than the Japanese pronunciation. You've heard of hara-kiri?"

"Everyone has heard of hara-kiri," I said. "Americans call it harry-karry."

"Ritual suicide by cutting out your intestines," said Hanao. "*Hara-kiri* is the *kun* pronunciation, and means, approximately, *belly-slitting*. But the *on* pronunciation is *seppuku,* which means, approximately, *gastrocision.* Nobody does it anymore, not since writer Yukio Mishima did it in the 1970s."

"Back to Fuji," I said. "So we're going to go to a scenic spot and look at Mt. Fuji."

"You don't want to miss it," he said.

"But everyone has seen it," I said. "I saw it on the Bullet Train going down the coast from Haneda airport. What more is there to see?"

"It is the highest point in Japan," said Hanao. "There is no sight that can compare with seeing the sunrise from the summit."

"So you mean, we are going to climb it?" I asked.

"If you are up to it."

I suddenly felt invigorated. "I used to hike in the mountains all the time. I think I still can."

"We'd better do a little jogging, not just those little walks in the evening after work," he told me. "And you need to get some boots and start breaking them in."

"Is Akiko coming?"

"No. Our little internal akachan is about the size of an avocado now. It needs as much oxygen as it can get, which Akiko cannot give it if she is panting for breath at that elevation."

*

Fuji is the most beautiful mountain in the world. It is an inactive volcano, having last erupted in 1707. All volcanoes are symmetrical, but Fuji is perfectly so, perhaps the world's most symmetrical volcano. The lower slopes are covered with dense forests, a mixture of conifers and broad-leaf trees, but about half of the slope is above timberline, covered with shrubs and flowers and grasses in the warmest part of the summer, when the snow retreats to little mounds and crevices.

We made our reservations well in advance. There were four trails leading from bus and tram stops on the middle slopes of the volcano. The one used most often is the Yoshida Trail. It is not the shortest or the easiest. It takes six hours up, four hours back down, for a healthy hiker. The other trails take only three hours to descend, and the Fujinomiya trail takes only five to ascend. But the Yoshida Trail has the most visitors, about a hundred thousand each year. Which means it has the most space inside its hiker huts, and the most trailside toilets. By the time we made our reservations, most of the hut spaces were rented out.

"You can go up and down in one day," said Hanao. "No need for a hut. That is, unless you plan to see the sunrise at the top."

"You could, I suppose, hike up during the night and reach the summit at sunrise, without camping," I said.

"That used to be possible, but now they close the trails at two in the afternoon. You have to be hiking by then. The huts are about halfway up from the trailheads. Too many people got lost when they tried hiking at night, and had to be rescued by helicopter. And people camping out on the trails, rather than in huts, creates a big mess."

I had a couple of months to prepare my body for the ascent of Fuji. I visited temples and historical sites. I considered walking along the path taken centuries ago by the poet Matsuo Bashō, but it was too long, and it was mostly heavy traffic, unlike the peaceful trail the poet had known. Everywhere I went there were steep mountains that fell suddenly down into absolutely flat plains filled with rice fields, with hardly any foothills between them. There were also rock-lined rice terraces on many of the mountainsides. Even the roadsides had rice planted on them. No square centimeter of the Japanese countryside seemed wasted.

I decided to check out an *ama* pearl-diver park along the coast of the Inland Sea. Visitors all had to pay for guest rooms, and were served traditional Japanese meals in rooms with sliding rice paper doors and low furniture. They even had servants who fixed our meals for groups of us. At first, I saw a plate of raw chicken and a fondue of hot water with seaweed boiling in it. I wondered if this was traditional Japanese cuisine: you cook the seaweed but eat the chicken raw. Fortunately, the cook boiled the chicken, and vegetables, in water flavored by seaweed, and we all ate the chicken on heaps of white rice with *hashi,* or chopsticks.

We were all up at dawn the next morning to watch the ama divers. They were all young women wearing bikini bottoms and nothing else. They all had shapely bosoms. They put on diving goggles and jumped into the ocean, and came back with oysters, inside each of which was a perfect pearl. We then bought the pearls, expensive but, I thought, well worth the price. Maybe there would be a young woman to whom, someday, I could give my pearl.

“I am glad you enjoyed your visit to the resort,” Hanao told me.

“I didn’t know there were still pearl-divers,” I said.

“There aren’t.”

“But, I saw them.”

“It is a special resort where they do traditional pearl-diving just for tourists. They sell their pearls only to the tourists, not to jewelers.”

“You mean, it was all a set-up?”

“Why not? Didn’t you enjoy it?”

“Very much,” I said, thinking of the comely women.

“Today, there are still some ama divers, but they wear thin white suits that even cover their heads. They haven’t gone topless since many decades ago. They got tired of western photographers. And for ama divers, it was a lifelong career. If the ones you saw were real, there would have been some older women there too.

“Didn’t it surprise you how quickly the women came back with oysters, and how every oyster had a pearl?” continued Hanao

“You mean, that was a set-up, too.”

“Set-up? Well, that is where all pearls come from. A practice started by Kokichi Mikimoto over a century ago. They are cultured pearls. You put a small, fake pearl into an oyster and let it secrete real pearl over it. The oysters that do this commercially are all out on racks in bays.

"Sure, the ama diver show is fake, but not very fake. And that used to be where all pearls came from, for the Emperor's court and the bakufu camp."

Hanao suggested a trip to Tokyo, but he knew I was going to say no. It's just a big, crowded city, the kind I don't like in America or Europe either. Going up Tokyo Tower is like going up the Eiffel Tower only it's not the Eiffel Tower.

*

Finally the day came when Hanao and I stepped off of the train at the Yoshida trailhead on Mt. Fuji with all of our food, water, and gear. Although it was now midsummer, the strong wind was chilly. The rainy season had just ended, but dry weather was only a matter of probability. We looked over forests and towns, such as Oyama, in the haze. Between the Japanese maples and beeches, we could see the beautiful form of Fuji. I could understand why the Japanese felt spiritual, almost fanatic, about this mountain. We were on the trail, with the loose volcanic rocks ringing audibly under our boots, long before the trailhead closed. We reached the guest house at the fifth station on the trail in early evening.

"So, how is your *o-naka* at this altitude?"

"My what?"

"Your *o-naka,* your honorable insides."

"Oh, I always get a little sick at high elevation, but not bad. I should have brought more water, Hanao."

"You can buy bottles of water here."

When we checked inside, we found that a large group had already reserved the dining area. This did not surprise Hanao, who had checked online. He just didn't know that they had reserved the entire dining area. The group was already eating rice and meat and drinking tea warmed over camp stoves. Hanao glanced at them then turned his back to them abruptly, with a somber look on his face.

"Don't look now, but Heike-san is here." He always referred to his brother-in-law by his family name.

"Is Sumiko-san here also?"

"I didn't see her. I think this is a chapter of the Japan Glory movement. Heike-san will almost certainly give some sort of speech. I think I need to hear what he says."

"You act as if he dislikes you, Hanao."

"He is resentful of several things, among them my faith. Christianity is too international for him."

The sun went down over the hills of Japan. The ocean was not visible in the west, certainly not the mountains of Korea, since Fuji was on the eastern side of Japan. We noticed men and women gathering on benches outside the hut, so we hid ourselves, while still able to watch them. We had set up our bedrolls in the men's shared sleeping area. We had only a few

square meters of bare wood, separated from all the other men by sheets hanging from ropes. We were ready to slip into our bedrolls quickly if it should be necessary.

Minoru Heike started to address about thirty people, who watched him in rapt attention.

"He will probably just say the same things that he always says on the news," said Hanao.

But then he didn't. He said nothing directly political, though of course anything a man like Heike says is indirectly political. He talked about how beautiful Fuji-san is, how perfect a mountain it is. He said it was the symbol of Japan to the world. It is lofty, and rises into the air completely by itself, not as part of some ridge or range or alliance.

"He's trying to say that Japan should act in its own interests, without considering anything its allies might suggest," Hanao whispered to me.

Heike-san said that everything you can see from Fuji is at lower elevation.

"Of course, it is," I said to Hanao.

"He was referring to Japanese superiority," whispered Hanao.

Heike-san said that all Japan must be united by a reverence for the gods that are native to this soil.

"He means that we should all embrace Shintō and reject foreign religions such as Buddhism and Christianity."

Heike-san said that, even when it is too cold for the *hinoki* and the *sugi* to grow, there are other native Japanese shrubs and flowers and grasses that can grow, all the way to the lip of the caldera.

"Even if the immediate future holds privations for Japan, we can endure them. That's what he means."

To me it sounded as if Heike was speaking like a park ranger addressing a crowd of amateur nature lovers, but Hanao was getting an entirely different message.

At least it seemed like Hanao's interpretation was incorrect, until Heike said, "And that is the spirit of Japan. We are united, we are strong, and we create peace and beauty wherever we are."

"I know what he means by united," Hanao whispered. "We all need to agree with him. What does he mean by peace? Remember that the reign of Hirohito, which included the second world war, was called *Shōwa,* the era of radiant peace. Is that the kind of peace Heike-san is thinking about?"

Then Heike spoke very loudly. "*Yamato damashii!*" Spirit of Japan.

The crowd shouted back, *Yamato damashii*!

Twice more, Heike shouted, *Yamato damashii!* And the crowd answered him

"Rest well, my friends," said Heike as Hanao translated for me. "Be ready with your torches. We leave at 2:30 am."

"Torches?" I asked.

"Flashlight helmets," said Hanao. "I used the British term."

"Spirit of Japan?" I asked Hanao.

"I think, or hope, that he just means the cultural ties that unite us, rather than anything that divides us from our allies."

"I didn't see Sumiko," I said.

"Neither did I. If you see her tomorrow, ignore her."

*

It was still completely dark when I woke to the stirrings of people in adjoining booths. Hanao shared lukewarm miso soup with me from an insulated flask. We stood in line for a chemical toilet, and we washed our faces with little towelettes. We put the used towelettes and wrappers into a plastic bag to take out with us. By 2:30 we were assembling with all the others at the trail. We listened for Heike's voice, but did not hear it above the mumble.

"What is this?" Hanao exclaimed quietly. "They have torches."

Heike's group had literal torches—stout pine branches, saturated with sap, with yellowish flames.

"I didn't think open fires were allowed on the mountain," I said.

"Normally they aren't," replied Hanao, "but apparently Heike-san was able to get an exception to the rule. He is a rather important person, after all."

Heike must have known the trail very well, for his group needed only the slightest bit of light to find it. Those of us who were not in his group slid up the mountain slope like a wave of bioluminescent squid, each light making its own sinuous path but forming a fabric of connectedness. This, I thought, is what makes the Japanese people what they are, the Yamato damashii. No matter how rugged the political and economic landscape may be, they cover it with a flexible fabric of their shared spirit. Flexible in incorporating non-Japanese ideas, habits, and beliefs, but only those that they liked.

But Heike and his group seemed to march rigidly uphill. Their torches were all lined up, two by two, making steady and unvarying progress toward the summit.

The slightest dawn light arrived without my noticing it. Soon the eastern sky was light gray, then deep blue, then a dirty yellow. We reached the summit right as the red sun was rising from the Pacific Ocean. The trees formed a grayish-green mantle far below us, and most of what we could see was alpine shrubs and loose volcanic rocks. The distances were so great that the view was breathtaking. Literally breathtaking, since we were at over twelve thousand feet elevation. Behind us, the caldera was still in darkness.

We all stopped and sat to watch the morning arrive. Hanao and I kept away from the others, behind a boulder. I glanced and was relieved when I did not see Sumiko. Perhaps she stayed home because she, like Akiko, would soon be a mother? A mother to a child that was not mine? I chased this thought from my mind.

Heike-san's group sat in straight rows. Heike rose to stand before them. It looked to me like, from where they sat, his head formed a silhouette against the rising sun. He led them in successive chants of *Yamato damashii*.

Chapter 10

One evening the next week, Hanao was visibly troubled when he got home. Akiko did not need to ask him to tell us what was on his mind. While we held our little cups of warm sake (or, in Akiko's case, tea), he told us.

"We are having a corporate merger," he said.

Normally this would mean, in Japan just as in America, that every job was now on the line. Corporate mergers almost always eliminate duplicate jobs. And this would probably mean that only the salaried employees—called *sarariiman*—that the boss liked the best would survive the transition. Akiko looked at her abdomen and, I assumed, thought about the family's future.

After the fact settled into our minds, Akiko asked, as if it mattered, "With which company?"

"Bakufu," he said.

"Your brother-in-law's company?" asked Akiko, smiling a little bit. "Why, then, there is no way they can fire you."

"It depends on how much of a sticking-out nail I am," said Hanao.

"What do you mean?" asked Akiko.

"Our company does not make anything that Bakufu makes. It is just an investment. We do mostly shipping. But that includes lumber."

"Yes?" I prompted.

"Japan has a long history of protecting its forests," continued Hanao. "Even back in feudal times, we had dense populations in small areas. We used a lot of wood. Most of our buildings were wood, not brick and stone as in the western world. We managed our forests better than anyone else in the world at that time. Not too different from the strict management of pre-industrial forests in Europe.

"But now, Japan imports a lot of lumber, and much of it is through our company. Japan does not have enough forest plantations of *sugi* and *hinoki* for all of its needs, so we import wood from Southeast Asia, mostly Indonesia."

I instantly knew what this meant: Hanao's company was one of the causes of extensive deforestation in Southeast Asia.

"But," I said, "the old days of tropical deforestation are over, aren't they? Businesses around the world, including Japan, now expect, even demand, that the lumber they use be certified by the Forest Stewardship Council." I had taught students about the FSC. "No more denuded hillsides, soil erosion, floods, extinctions…"

Hanao looked at me sadly. "This is what shows up on paper and in computer databases. But the reality is that rainforests get destroyed anyway. Take, for example, selective harvest. Just cutting down some, not all, of the trees. Do you realize just how few trees have to be left

standing in order for a forest to qualify for selective logging designation? Not many, and soon they die from the hot sun and because the other trees cannot shelter them from storms. Not only that, but reforestation is supposed to be with native tree species. But the enforcement of reforestation laws depends on each country's government. Indonesia, apparently, has no problem with replacing a tropical rainforest with an oil palm plantation.

"What I am trying to say is, when the announcement was made that, as part of Bakufu, we would be investing heavily in Southeast Asian lumber, I was the only one who objected."

After some silence, Akiko spoke. "Hanao-san, I have always loved your original thinking. My flower man. But you can see that no matter what you say, the investments will be made? Neh? But now, why couldn't you keep your opinions to yourself? Our family now has a third person to think about. You don't want to be…" Her voice rose a little. "…like one of those samurai, the *rōnin*, who wandered about the countryside after the fall of their lord."

"Some of them moved to California and started nursery businesses," said Hanao. I knew he referred to the influx of newly-unemployed Japanese after the fall of the feudal regime in the nineteenth century.

"Now is not the time for that," Akiko said, more loudly. "We have to prepare for our little *akachan*. This is no time to uproot, start over…" She turned to me. "We are ashamed that we have aired our disagreement before our guest."

"You are doing exactly the right things," I said. "Both of you. Besides, Hanao, you do not yet know for sure that you will lose your job."

Chapter 11

Things started happening faster than anyone could have predicted. Ever since Vladimir Putin led the Russians on an invasion of the Ukraine, the Japanese government had been making plans to protect themselves from Russian invasion. It would probably come from the north, from Aniva bay at the southern extremity of Sakhalin Island, which was only a few dozen kilometers from Cape Sōya at the northern tip of Hokkaido, near the town of Wakkanai.

But, despite fear talk from people such as Minoru Heike, such an invasion seemed hardly imminent. Most Japanese sneered at the Russians. What could they do? When Putin invaded the Ukraine in 2022, he apparently thought they could conquer the Ukraine as fast as their troops could walk, ride, or fly. They did not count on Ukrainian resistance, in every way from the latest military technology, supplied by America and the European Union, to Ukrainian peasant women throwing jars of pickled tomatoes at their drones. Very quickly, hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers were killed. It was not very long before Russia was unable to invade Ukraine any further, except in one region near the border. Russia suffered international embarrassment when the news came out that they were now relying heavily on North Korean troops, and on weapons supplied by Iran. Most people in the world, certainly in Japan, thought that Russia was unable to support its own invasions. Putin was already plundering the population and resources of Siberia to draft into its Ukrainian invasion. There is nothing left, the Japanese military officials said, with which to invade Japan, eleven time zones away from the Kremlin. Any such invasion would undoubtedly be mostly by North Korea, a dictatorship clothed in secrecy, except for its occasional practice missile strikes, a nation that spent much of its budget on imprisoning and starving anyone who had even the slightest thoughts out of line with its communist military leaders.

But Heike held a news conference at the stone monument at the tip of Cape Sōya, the northernmost point in Japan. He waved his arm toward Sakhalin Island, invisible in the distance, and said that Japan should be ready for invasion. North Korea did not seem like much of a threat on the world scene, but they could cause a lot of trouble if they tried to conquer Japan. Heike-san said that a North Korean or Russian invasion of Japan would suffer the same fate as that of the Mongol invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281, both of which were destroyed by storms, leading to the concept of the *divine wind* or *kamikaze* in which the gods would protect Japan.

But only, he added, if Japan had military readiness.

Then, one day, the news struck the world. Donald Trump, the American president, announced that it would become a major trading partner with Russia. (21) Soon the economy of Russia, which had been depressed by international embargoes, began to flourish with American taxpayer investments. Not only that, but Trump announced that it would no longer provide military support to countries against whom Russia had legitimate territorial claims. This, of course, included the Ukraine, which before the fall of the USSR had not been merely a satellite

nation but was one of the members of the original Soviet Union. With this single announcement, Trump virtually opened the wheat fields and oil fields of the Ukraine to the Russians.

But Russia also had what it considered to be a legitimate historical claim over Japan. Putin announced that the indigenous Ainu people of Hokkaido were actually Russians. They were white and hairy, compared to the people of the other Japanese islands. *Just look at these people,* said Putin. *They look Russian.* Actually, they looked a little bit Asian, but so did many of the indigenous tribes of Siberia, over whom Russia had long had jurisdiction even before the Russian Revolution of 1917. Japan did not take full control of Hokkaido until 1868, until which time, Putin said, it belonged to Russia. There was no historical evidence for this claim. At the end of World War Two, Soviet forces under Stalin tried to invade Hokkaido, but never succeeded.

Quickly after Trump's announcement, the Japan Self-Defense Force appointed Heike as its special commander for forces in the north. Heike immediately accepted and his followers enthusiastically rallied, all over the country, for him.

And there matters might have stood for a very long time. But then the Japanese prime minister announced that the United States military forces would either have to defend Japan from a Russian invasion, or else pull all of its troops out of Japan, including the big military base in Okinawa.

"You came here," the Japanese prime minister explained to America, "because we were a conquered nation. We remain the only nation in human history to have had nuclear weapons used against us. How could we resist whatever you wanted to do? But you stayed because we chose to accept your protection. Now, as you have called this protection into question, there is no more reason for you to be here."

The meeting between Heike and the American Secretary of State Ulysses S. Lincoln was supposed to be routine and to agree on vague, unenforceable timelines for American withdrawal. But, while the cameras covered the public phase of their meeting, Lincoln announced that America would support Russia's territorial claim over Hokkaido, and not interfere with Russian annexation. Heike exploded in anger and left the stage.

Before long, the photographs were in the world press: Donald Trump shaking hands with Vladimir Putin, and the newly-appointed Japanese Defense Secretary Minoru Heike rallying his supporters outside of a major American military base on the main island of Japan.

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Thinking that things could not possibly get worse, Hanao, Akiko, and I met for dinner after Hanao's last day of work. He had no problem moving out of his office, as he had already removed most of his personal belongings, knowing that the lock would quickly be changed once his termination was official.

Hanao tried to smile and be jovial. "I've been checking into something really interesting," he said. "Something that will keep me occupied and, better yet, excited."

"Have some *nattō*?" Akiko handed me a tray of some really foul-smelling rotten soybeans. "I put some Vietnamese rotten fish sauce on it." I declined. We started eating the shrimp tempura that Akiko had made.

"The big new thing," said Hanao, between bites, "is the Miyawaki Method of replanting forests. It was invented by our very own Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki. But is being used in thousands of places all over the world."

"Is someone going to hire our akachan's daddy to do this?" asked Akiko.

"I have to volunteer with a local gardening association," said Hanao, "but then we can apply for a grant that might have a little stipend with it."

"Oh, a little stipend," said Akiko.

Hanao stood up. I had never seen him this angry. Apparently Akiko had not, either. "You got a better idea, *ok'san*?" I had never heard him call Akiko "wife" before. "Maybe our *akachan's chichi* can find more than a little stipend?"

"I am sorry, *otto,*" she said, calling him *husband*. *"Anata wa tadashii yo."* You are right, my dear.

"And you," said Hanao, smiling at me. "You and your environmental issues. This would be ideal for you, also, to join with me in planting trees. This will also give you something to write about in your report."

I smiled. "It would, indeed." But I quickly lost my smile.

"I realize," said Hanao, "that this is a time of national emergency. We cannot know what Donald Trump and his great friend Vladimir Putin might have in mind for us. But what better time than now to rebuild our country? The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now."

"Something Lao-tze supposedly said," I pointed out.

"Or Confucius. Or it is a saying that has been floating around for centuries. Especially if we start having economic hardships, or international conflicts, little attention will be paid to our natural resources. It will be something that only a few of us *deru kugi* will be thinking about. Fortunately, it is something that only a handful of us need to do in order for it to succeed.

"You see, the Miyawaki Method is just like natural forest regeneration, but with a little help. Instead of creating a tree plantation, you plant lots of native tree species at high density. Such a high density that they cannot possibly all survive. But that is the point, *neh*? The strongest seedlings survive. Where this method has been tried, forests have grown back in five years that would normally have taken twenty. You don't need a big government bureaucracy to do this.

"The result is just like a natural forest. Not a tree plantation, with all the *sugi* and *hinoki* in straight lines.

"Well," concluded Hanao, "let's cerebrate."

"You mean, celebrate," I said.

"That, too. Let us use our brains, our cerebrums, but also have a good time."

Then I said, "Speaking of time," even though we had not been. "I may not have much of it."

Both Hanao and Akiko looked at me with sudden fear.

"I got a message from the American consulate today," I said. "They said that, because of the deteriorating relationship between America and Japan, the Japanese government might be terminating my visa early. I might have to go back to America." I sighed and looked at the floor. "And face up to that lawsuit, I guess."

I expected Hanao to commiserate with me, but his face betrayed nothing. He simply said, "Wait until you hear something from the Japanese government. They will decide this matter. The only thing the American government can do is revoke your passport. Did they mention this?"

"No," I said, suddenly regaining a little bit of happiness.

"Fine. We start planting trees with the Hadakenomiya Garden Club tomorrow morning."

Hanao and I helped Akiko clean up the table and wash dishes. They had no dishwasher.

"Ah, to get dirt underneath my fingernails again," said Hanao.

"Maybe our little *akachan* will grow up planting trees," said Akiko.

Hanao looked off into a distant future in which all the good things, and none of the bad things, that we had discussed, happened.

"Are you still mad at me?" Akiko asked her husband.

He kissed her. "You might need to excuse us, my friend," he said to me.

I did some light reading before bed, while ignoring muffled noises of pleasure from the other bedroom. Then I made the choice, perhaps unwise, to check the online news on my phone. Japan had launched an attack on an American ship off the coast of Sakhalin Island. It was one of Heike-san's drones that carried a still-unidentified payload.

Chapter 12

"Well," Hanao said to me over breakfast the next morning. "Maybe you won't be going back to America so soon after all."

"How so?" I asked.

"The middle of a war is no time for people to be traveling between countries," he said.

"This just keeps getting worse and worse," said Akiko. She switched on the television monitor and we watched it.

The news report said that the Japanese Prime Minister denounced the presence of an American ship off the coast of northern Hokkaido. "Its obvious purpose," said the PM, "is to facilitate the Russian invasion of Hokkaido. There has been massive troop and weapons buildup in southern Sakhalin Island, including many North Korean troops. This kind of buildup is exactly what Russia did in the months preceding the invasion of the Ukraine in 2022."

A news flash showed Donald Trump, speaking from a golf cart in Florida. "This totally unprovoked attack on the part of Japan will not go unpunished," he said. "Our ship was just sitting there, doing nothing. We were just observing the situation in case it got out of hand. And it did. The use of a tactical nuclear weapon might be the spark that starts a world war. And it won't be pretty."

"Nuclear?" exclaimed Hanao, along with millions of other Japanese that we could not hear.

The Japanese PM was quickly back on the air. "There is no evidence that a nuclear device was used," he said. "Russia claims that a very high level of nuclear radiation has been detected near their base in Sakhalin. But we have only their word on this. There is no independent confirmation."

Hanao looked very grim. "Heike-san never told anybody what was in his payload," he said. "We have only his word that it was *not* a nuclear device."

Donald Trump reappeared on the television. "My Secretary of State Ulysses S. Lincoln and Secretary of War Josh Plunderer have both advised me that we should declare war on the Empire of Japan, just like our esteemed President Franklin Delano Roosevelt did." He pronounced the name de-*lay*-no. "We will begin preparations immediately. We trust that Congress will follow through with a formal declaration very quickly."

The television commentators began a flurry of comments on the exchange between the leaders of Japan and America. Russia and North Korea had said nothing.

Hanao looked thoughtful. "There is no Empire of Japan," he said. "Empires have emperors, and our Emperor has no power at all. Also, the last time I heard Donald Trump talk about Franklin Roosevelt, he called him a socialist because of his big government programs. The Big Deal or whatever it was in the 1930s. Programs that eventually, under his successor Truman,

became the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe and the money used to rebuild Japan, both after the war. The result was a prosperous Europe and prosperous Japan, both strong American allies, and a supremely successful investment by Truman. Imagine Trump now saying something good about Roosevelt.

"Well," Hanao continued, rising from the table. "We need to meet with the gardeners."

"At a time like this?" asked Akiko.

"The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time was yesterday. The third best time is today," he said.

*

No one was more surprised than Hanao to receive a specially-delivered message from his brother-in-law, the Defense Minister of Japan.

"Why would he want to contact you?" I asked.

"I think it was Sumiko's idea," said Akiko.

"It is a formal lunch on the American military base outside Tokyo. A meeting between Heike-san and the American Secretary of War Josh Plunderer. He says I may bring guests. That means you, Kome-san, if you are willing to take the risk. We will be in the guest area of the dining hall."

Hanao said that his sister was very unlikely to be present.

"Why would Heike invite you to a meeting?" I asked.

"Not for any expertise, that is for certain," said Hanao. "He said he trusted and desired my advice, in general. This is why I think perhaps it was, indeed, Sumiko's idea."

Chapter 13

I had just enough time before this meeting to travel to Kyoto and visit one of the most spectacular garden spots in Japan: the Kiyomizu-dera temple at Higashi-yama, named after the eastern mountain. Since I suspected I might be leaving Japan very soon, and might never be able to return, I had to see and write about this place.

I explored the historically-preserved villages at the base of the mountain, slowly climbing the stairs at Sannenzaka past tea shops. I was entirely alone, a tourist and yet not one, and spoke to no one. I stood and looked up at the towering Yasoka Pagoda, and wondered what sort of religious delusions made people devote years of their lives and their best creativity to making it, as if it could puncture the heavens with its pinnacle. I stopped for a long time to look at the temple itself, a huge wooden structure that rose above the trees and projected over the side of the mountain. Its four-story balcony and pointed roofs were constructed without a single nail. A Shinto shrine was inside of a Buddhist temple, or was it the other way around, but I realized that religion was an instinct that every human culture, though not every human being, possessed, and that there was a mystery that none of us would ever understand, and why should we even try?

I saw lots of *geisha* women, or were they *maiko*, I get them mixed up, in full kimonos, walking with little steps off to entertain men at low tables on tatami mat floors. Sometimes there was sex, but usually it was just mindless bliss, as the women played slow, forgettable melodies on *shamisen* string instruments. Light, tinkling pleasures flowing over a deep foundation of religious mystery: perhaps this is what life is all about? Most people other than the geisha and maiko were wearing American-style clothes. There was one woman, however, who wore a kimono, blue decorations on a white background with a brown *obi* sash, but with no further decorations. Her getas were tatami-lined, and she wore socks with the big toe separate from the others.

The entrance to the temple was under the Otowa waterfall, which flowed into a pool. The water came from three streams that converged. Before entering, each visitor was supposed to use one of the metal cups, at the end of long narrow metal handles, to rinse their hands and purify their souls. A little boy cupped some water and dribbled it over my grateful hands. Then I took a handle and found myself pouring water over the large hands of the woman in the plain kimono.

It was Sumiko.

She did not look up at me until I said, “Sumiko-san.”

She pulled back, the water still dripping from her fingers. “Kome-san?”

I could only repeat her name, this time with breathless wonder.

She looked away. “Did you come here looking for me?”

“How could I? I did not know you were here at Higashiyama.”

“I meant, to Japan.”

"I don't know what I was looking for. I am staying with your brother. I hoped that he might be able to help me figure out what I was looking for."

"Well, it's not me."

"So he told me, Mrs. Heike."

"I'm not supposed to be here, Kome-san. Please tell no one you saw me."

All I could think of to say was to repeat what I had read on the signage. "The water here comes from three streams. One of the streams guarantees academic success. I guess we both did that."

"We did," Sumiko said, continuing to look away from me. The same squawking voice I remembered. The same plain face, though now surrounded by a fine coiffure.

"Another stream guarantees good health. May I presume this is true for both of us also?"

"Good enough."

"The third guarantees good luck in love and romance. That part of my future is not yet written. I congratulate you on finding love."

Sumiko looked down at the last water dripping from her hands. "I suppose that depends on how you define love."

"You define it for yourself," I said.

"Minoru is a fine husband," said Sumiko. "But I cannot find any way of defining love that describes him." I handed the cup handle to another person who was waiting patiently for it. She bowed quickly and dipped the cup into the pool.

Then Sumiko looked into my eyes and said, "I should not be talking with you about this. You and I, nothing could happen. *Shigata ga nai.* There is nothing to do about it. That door is closed."

"Minoru-san does not know you are here," I said.

"I left him my contact information."

"Sumiko-chan," I said, unthinkingly reverting into a familiar, lovers' form of address. "I know you are Minoru's wife. But are you his *sumi-ko*?"

"What?" asked Sumiko, puzzled.

"His ink-child, the one who could draw so elegantly and who shared her creativity with whoever was willing to accept it. Does Minoru know or care anything about this aspect of your being?"

Sumiko stared at me uncomprehendingly, then said, "That is no longer a part of who I am. I am Heike-no-ok'san, Mrs. Heike. I have come to this temple to find peace in this role, not to question it or change it." When I started to speak, she took a deep sigh and said, "I told you to forget about me."

"That isn't possible, you know."

"You cannot imagine that it was easy for me to forget you," she said. "But I did."

"You will always be in my heart…"

She stood up suddenly. "We will not talk more of this." She turned toward one of the gates and started walking toward it. She looked back, stopped, and faced me. "Please, Kome-san.

Forget about me.” She set her face toward the gate, and did not look back until she had gone through it. For just a moment, she glanced at me, and was then gone.

Chapter 14

I returned to the Takemoto house, and was just about to sit down to dinner with them. The next thing I knew, it was early afternoon. I was very tired, and there was a hospital tag on my wrist. I looked around the room, and it was, indeed, the guest bedroom at Hanao and Akiko's house. All I could do was to stare at the tag and sit silently.

Then I looked at the golden sunlight coming through the thin curtains. This reminded me of the fields of mustard flowers in which I sat when I was a boy, whole fields of them as far as I could see. I was young enough to not know that they were fields of canola that had been planted as an oilseed crop. But they were magical in the spring sunlight. Then, later, I saw a photograph of a similar field of mustard flowers that grew in Japan with, of course, Mt. Fuji in the background, still covered in springtime snow. All of my childhood feelings of magic in the natural world were transferred to Japan, which I kept wanting to visit.

I looked from the window to the *tokonoma*, which is a little alcove that is found in every traditional Japanese house. Of course, for Hanao, the tokonoma was a Christian rather than a Shinto shrine. Like the traditional tokonoma, Hanao's had a vase of plastic flowers, cherry blossoms that were always fresh, and some little Japanese dolls, which would no doubt be used by their akachan, if it was a girl. On the back wall hung a rice-paper painting on a roll of bamboo fibers with tassels at the bottom. Instead of a Buddha or a landscape, this painting showed Jesus emerging from his rocky sepulcher. A tokonoma was a little world, just as all of Japan seemed like a little world to japanophiles, that is, people who were fascinated by Japan. As I sat in my bed, I felt like Lafcadio Hearn, the Irish-American writer who went to Japan in the nineteenth century, fell in love with it, and stayed there until his death, writing Japanese stories for English-speaking readers. First by marrying a black woman in America, then by going to Japan and marrying a Japanese woman, Hearn was a deru kugi in both countries.

To an American from the land of big skies and broad prairies, even a small American like myself, Japan seemed like a land of miniatures. I was even told this by a first-generation Japanese immigrant (*issei*, first generation) in California. Like many Japanese immigrants, he was a nurseryman and farmer. He told me that when he grew plants in small pots in his greenhouse, the plants were smaller than the ones in large pots or outdoors. He said the same is true of people. Japan is smaller, the houses are smaller, and so the people grow to be smaller also. Though I knew even at the time that his story could not be true, it influenced my perceptions of Japan.

I glanced at my bedside table, where I had placed the book that Hanao had given me when I arrived: *Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji*, some essays written by an American who lived in Japan. I noticed the bookmark. It was some mustard flowers pressed, dried, and sealed inside of acetate layers. It was signed with the name of the creator: Takemoto Sumiko. I recognized the

characters: *Takemoto* meant place of the bamboo, and *Sumiko* meant ink child. She had made one for me, which I left in a safe place back in America; this was one she had made for her brother. I picked up the book, took out the bookmark, and held the translucent flowers up to the window light.

I remembered one of my conversations, by letter, with Sumiko, about mustard flowers. I told her how beautiful the fields of mustard were, in America and in Japan. Each plant produces hundreds of seeds, and each seed can grow into a whole new plant. Each plain, brown seed had all of the delicate yellow beauty coded inside of it. She wrote back to me that the seed just had to have the chance to grow. Most mustard seeds did not get this chance, but a few always did.

Akiko looked into my room, then called to Hanao. "He's awake," she said.

Hanao rushed in. Without a job, he was home during working hours. "Kome-san! How do you feel?"

"Tired," I said. "What happened?"

"You had some kind of seizure and fell down at our table three nights ago," Hanao said. "We called ambulance, and they took you to hospital. After they stabilized you, and could find no abnormality, they released you to come back to our home. It is a good thing you had that international insurance card in your wallet."

"Did the doctors have any idea what might have caused my seizure?"

"They could find no physical cause. No imbalance of electrolytes, or brain lesions. As for emotional stresses? I'm supposed to ask you about those," said Hanao.

"I am not aware of anything in particular. Just the background stress about which I have already told you."

I had not told him about seeing Sumiko at Higashiyama.

I now began to remember some of my dreams during my seizure. I told Hanao and Akiko about them. "People were rushing around, and I didn't know where I was. Both of you were there."

"That actually happened," said Hanao.

"And," I said hesitantly, "Sumiko was there also. But that must have been a delusion."

Hanao hesitated before he said, "No, actually, Kome-san, she was here. She was coming for a visit anyway, and when she heard about your seizure, she came quickly. She left before you fully awoke."

"She held my hand, Hanao."

"*Hai*," he said. "She did."

"And I started to see a tunnel of light," I said. "That is a stereotypical part of a Near Death Experience. I did not get very far. I felt that my spirit was floating toward this tunnel. And then I heard a voice. Hanao-san, did Sumiko say anything to me?"

"Not that I recall, but she might have."

"In my dream, she told me that I needed to go back to my life, that there was much unfinished business that I needed to do. She said something about seeds that need to grow. That

there were people who needed me to help them. Hanao, I know this sounds ridiculous, but I had the feeling that my life was spared for a purpose."

"Kome-san, in Jesus' Name, that does not sound ridiculous to me at all."

"And that purpose has something to do with Sumiko."

Hanao sighed. "If you have some purpose that involves her, you will find out about it in due time. God works in ways that we cannot imagine. But for now, you should still forget about her."

*

As I continued to recuperate at the Takemoto house, I sat in their little garden. Well, it was supposed to be a garden, someday. And now Hanao had a chance to work on it. The only blooming plant right then was *hana-daikon*, which meant flower-radish. It had beautiful violet flowers, which were very similar to mustard flowers except for the color. A daikon is a large radish, a root, usually pickled and eaten. But there was a variety of daikon that did not produce as big of a root but was esteemed for its flowers.

"I got the seeds for these radish flowers from my father," said Hanao.

"They are beautiful," I said.

"There is a story behind them," he said.

"Would you tell me the story? We both have time now, for you to tell it, and for me to listen to it."

Hanao took out a printed manuscript. "My father wrote this story," he said. "In Japanese, of course. When I heard you were coming to stay with us, I translated it. This is a copy of it, and I want you to have it."

"Thank you very much. Could I ask you to read it?"

"It is his autobiography," said Hanao. "And it explains why he named me Hana-o."

HANA-DAIKON

It was two weeks after the surrender before the American soldiers arrived. The soldiers were like God walking through the garden in the cool of the morning, while we were like creeping things. The soldiers had guns, but were friendly, and smiled, speaking not one word we could understand. I survived because I was a clever boy and could find food on the black market, enough for me, my mother, and my sisters as we hid in what remained of our house.

After the surrender, when the American bomb raids stopped, rain mixed dust with shards of cement in the rubble of a building near our house. A few plants began to grow in this new soil. At first I did not know what the plants were, just a few ragged lobed leaves. As they grew larger, and flowered, I recognized them: they were radishes, in the mustard

family of plants, as I had learned in biology class before the schools closed down. The four purple petals formed crosses of blood as the earth cried out. Every evening, I found time to come to the little hillock of radishes. As I looked up at the stars, which marked signs and seasons and days and years, I wondered if the radishes would set seed before winter came.

I was puzzled that radishes would grow here, rather than the more common weeds. I was even more puzzled when I found that a pool of rainwater near the rubble had been carefully reworked to form a pond, and someone had put koi goldfish into it, flashes of gold and red and black and white.

One evening I saw a girl, like me just emerging into adulthood. She gathered a few ripe seeds from the radishes, and dropped some fragments of dry rice into the fishpond. She was startled at my approach.

"Don't be afraid," I said. "I have been coming here often, to see the flowers and fish. You planted the flowers?"

"*Sō des',*" she whispered.

"*Nan da?*" I asked what they were.

She told me they were *hana-daikon,* flower-radishes, not the kind we eat. Her father had been an army officer in Manchukuo, the name we had given to conquered Manchuria. In the spring of 1939 he had walked the hills outside of Harbin. Hidden among the profuse growth of purple flowers, *hana-daikon,* he had seen the bones of thousands of Chinese civilians who had been slaughtered by our troops two years before. He wept that such beauty could grow on top of, and hide, the evidence of such carnage, which neither he nor the Japanese population had heard about. He gathered many seeds from the hana-daikon, and promised that if he lived, and when the war ended, as wars always do, he would spread the seeds throughout Japan as a symbol of peace. He gave some to his daughter Toriko.

"This spot is our peace shrine," said Toriko. "Our place of peace and beauty. We have no garden at home."

"Where do you live?"

"We live under a bridge. Just my father and I. While my father was in Manchuria, our house was bombed, and only I survived." She showed me the scar tissue that would never heal on her arm.

We talked about what we had seen during the American bombing raids. Each night, early in the war, heavy blackout curtains separated the light from the darkness. The amber light from our kerosene lamp bathed the rice paper walls and tatami mats, and glinted from the lacquerware in the tokonoma. Each morning, the curtains blocked the bright sunlight, except for a narrow sliver, a sword of sunrise that sliced the kitchen table from the east window as we drank our bowls of miso soup.

Late in the war, the light was no longer separated from the darkness. We ran out of kerosene, and at night there was more light coming from the buildings that burned from the incendiary bombing than from our few candles. On these nights the curtains usually stayed open. The clouds of smoke formed a firmament, and as the rain fell, blackened by smoke, the waters above were no longer separated from the waters below. As spirits of the dead arose into the firmament like fireflies that we did not see that summer, their atoms fell to the earth and polluted the streams and rivers. Even the boundary between

the sea and the dry land disappeared, as bombs fell in the bay and washed waves of flotsam-filled water into the streets.

Toriko had been astounded when her father returned and found her. My father, however, did not return. He also was in the army. When the news of his death reached us I was filled with a strange feeling, of the universal movement of atoms, of the endless cycling of water, of his atoms joining the ocean at Okinawa and dispersing throughout the world.

Toriko and I met every night at the little peace garden. Sometimes we sat silently, sometimes talked, sometimes embraced. I would silently give her a bag of rice and vegetables for her and her father. When winter came, she brought her father and the koi to live with us.

One day in the bright glare of a winter day, under a blue sky to whose silence we were still not accustomed, we visited the shrine, and found that American bulldozers had scooped up the rubble of the building. An American supervisor knew just enough Japanese to tell us that a *gakkō*, a school, would be built there. In later years, this was where Toriko and I attended high school, and learned mathematics and engineering so that we could compete in the new Japanese workplace. The Japanese economy grew because of people like us, and like our children, who worked far into the night which was lit up like the day by electric lights. For us the new economy was a war, from which retirement was our only relief. In the little garden of our home, we grew *hana-daikon,* and once in a while we would stop and look at them.

*

"It has Biblical imagery in it," I said. "God walking in the cool of the morning in the Garden of Eden in Genesis. And the signs for seasons and for days and for years."

"And the creeping things, also from Genesis," Hanao said. "And the separation of light from darkness, and the waters above from the waters below. All from Genesis. And all of it work that is still ongoing."

Chapter 15

Before the meeting at the Misaka American military base could take place, the world shifted.

Heike was a genius, and designed some of the best military drones in the world. He did not do it by himself, though. When Donald Trump announced cutbacks in science and engineering research, a few years earlier, and fired hundreds of federally-supported engineers, someone had forgotten to tell him that these engineers designed equipment that was crucial to America's defense systems. Many of the systems were designed by DARPA, the American Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, which the administration had not cut, but many others were designed by engineers who worked at other agencies and had been fired. Trump scrambled to hire them back, but not before Heike had contacted them and offered them lucrative positions working for Bakufu in Japan. Somehow, Heike-san had gotten access to a nearly unlimited amount of funding.

These drones were no ordinary drones. They were modeled after medieval ninja weapons. They were as precise and deadly as the traditional ninja weapons, but had video monitors and were enhanced by AI. After the Japanese and American delegates had arrived at the Mikasa Air Base, Heike ordered an attack on a nearby American naval base.

The first thing that happened was that all deliveries to the naval base had to be halted, because thousands of *makibishi* caltrops appeared on the roads at the delivery entrances. These spiked balls have been used in warfare all over the world for centuries, to puncture feet and later tires. The difference, this time, was that the caltrops had flown through the air and delivered themselves. They were small enough, not much larger than tarantulas, that radar had not detected them.

Immediately afterwards, dozens of *shuriken* throwing-stars, with rotors of sharp razors, had slipped in through the doors unnoticed and hidden themselves behind curtains and blinds. Nobody controlled where they went, and nobody knew where they hid themselves, not even Heike. But as soon as one of them detected human flesh, it launched itself in the air and started whirling its razor rotors. They slashed necks and hands, leaving the injured personnel to bleed and die.

Ninja weaponry had long included grenades. But Heike's grenades propelled themselves through the air and found major hubs in which to explode. The use of soft-cased bombs that released poison gas or blinding powder was yet another technology from the past that Bakufu had repurposed with artificial intelligence. They left many American personnel on the floor coughing and sightless.

Many American personnel took refuge in the cafeteria, but this did not work either. A couple of hundred of Bakufu's flying toasters had slipped in through the kitchen entrance, and now flew into the cafeteria to launch little explosives from their slots.

The most creative weapons, however, were the ninja turtles that carried spray guns of caustic chemicals. Japanese defense personnel had released them into the sewers, and they found their way to the coordinates of the Misaka restrooms, where they waited in the toilets until someone used them and they then shot the chemicals into the exposed butts. They caused little damage, but at the same time that all the other weapons were flying about, it was psychologically devastating for the Americans to see slimy turtles slipping across the floors, and pantless employees rushing out of the restrooms.

Within minutes, the American commander walked outside, avoiding the constantly moving caltrops, to surrender to Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Heike.

The American Secretary of Defense Josh Plunderer, an inexperienced but extremely devoted man appointed by President Trump, could think of nothing more to do than to, as he said, create a repeat of August 1945, when American planes had dropped atomic weapons on Hiroshima on August 5 and Nagasaki on August 9. This time it was nuclear missiles launched directly from the main American air base, Yokota, near Tokyo, which headed south to the newly-doomed cities. But Heike had anticipated this, and had yet more drones ready to respond. There would have been no way for an anti-missile defense system to protect Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the drones, which looked like cormorants, flew to the missiles and stuck to them. The drones flapped their wings. They collectively imparted a momentum that made the missiles turn around and head back north to the base from which they were launched. When the American commander realized that his base would be destroyed by his own nuclear weapons, he exploded the missiles in the air. The first thing most Japanese knew about it was when they saw huge flashes of light and saw scintillating shards of burning metal settling down over the slopes of Mt. Fuji.

*

"Hanao-san!" cried Akiko as she clung to Hanao. "You do not need to go! It is so dangerous! The whole world is so dangerous! Think of our little akachan!"

"I am always thinking of our akachan, and of you."

"I could not bear it if anything happened to you!"

"I think you could," said Hanao. "The Lord is our strength."

They had already had this conversation several times that morning.

"Then I can go with you!" said Akiko.

"We cannot both take this risk," said Hanao. "Think of our little akachan."

Hanao and I were standing in the doorway. The taxi driver was waiting to take us to the train so that we could go to the meeting at the American military base. Both I and the driver stood aside as Hanao and Akiko bathed one another in tears.

We hardly noticed Mt. Fuji from the train, nor the delicate woodlands of bamboo that sprouted from among the beech and conifer forests. A little waterfall went by so rapidly that it was gone before we could gasp at its beauty. We knew so little of what to expect at this meeting that we had nothing to talk about.

*

Both the American and Japanese delegations had come to the meeting expecting to negotiate peace. The events seemed so surreal and dreamlike that none of us could believe they had really happened. But when they arrived, the Japanese and American delegates—as well as we, their guests—found ourselves prisoners of a special contingent of Japanese soldiers who had sworn loyalty not to Japan, or the Emperor, or the government, but personally to Minoru Heike.

Heike-san walked boldly onto the platform. He was in full samurai costume, complete with a *katana* sword hanging obliquely from his waist. Plunderer was in full uniform, with enough medals to sink a ship. He stepped up onto the platform to face Heike-san.

Heike-san said, “We are now expecting you to surrender, which your President will soon verify.”

The Secretary said, “We have no intention to surrender.”

“My military equipment can terminate all of you,” said Heike.

“And as we speak, troops are heading south from Russia into Hokkaido,” said Plunderer.

“My drones will make short work of them,” said Heike.

“I am authorized to tell you that we reserve the option of using nuclear weapons,” said Plunderer.

“And I authorize myself to tell you that you have no, how do you say, freaking idea what kinds of payloads my drones have,” said Heike.

They stared at one another in silence. All of the rest of us—the delegates in the front, we guests in the back—were motionless.

Heike and Plunderer kept staring at one another.

At that moment, a shot rang out. Everyone looked around, unsure who had fired it or at whom, if anyone had been hit, or if we heard a ricochet. I stood, dumbfounded. Hanao crouched, then pulled me down. “Get head down, stupid,” he said.

But there were four men who did not crouch. One was a Japanese general, in military uniform. Another was an American general. Another was Plunderer, and the fourth was Heike. The Japanese and American military leaders approached the platform.

The American general spoke first. “Sir,” he said, addressing Plunderer, “you have brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. As soon as you or the president launch the first missile, all the other missiles in the world will launch, and destroy the world as we know it. The few survivors will know that America, which once stood for freedom and dignity, caused the collapse of civilization. The few survivors, who will envy the dead, will curse America. Chain of command or not, we cannot permit you to do this. Even as I speak, President Trump is declaring

that you have been fired. He wants power, not death. As a symbol of your resignation, please remove your revolver from your belt and lay it on the table."

Plunderer remained motionless.

Then the Japanese general spoke to Heike-san. "If a nuclear war begins, Japan will be one of the losers, along with the rest of the world. The name of Heike has been a proud one for a millennium and a half. You have now made it a synonym for Hell. You have brought shame on Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun, on *Yamato damashii.* You are unworthy to continue your life. As a symbol of your resignation, please remove your katana from your sash and lay it on the table."

Heike remained motionless.

"As my counterpart in the Japan Self Defense Force will agree," said the American general to Plunderer, "no order that either of you give will be obeyed. You are totally isolated on your platform. We can either shoot you down like dogs, or else you can do the honorable thing."

"America hates you," said the American general to Plunderer.

"Japan hates you," said the Japanese general to Heike.

Heike and Plunderer looked at one another.

"Now you will see," said Plunderer, "what courage looks like." He laid his revolver on the table, then slowly removed his military jacket. He started to unbutton the front of his shirt.

"No, I will not see it," said Heike. Heike laid his katana on the table. He then picked up the revolver, pointed it at his temple, and pulled the trigger. He collapsed on the table in a pool of blood.

Plunderer picked up the katana, removed it from its sheath, and buried the blade in his belly right up to the hilt.

*

The Japanese and American news reporters said that such acts of valor had never been witnessed in the history of the world. Very quickly, President Trump signed a declaration from both houses of Congress proclaiming a day of mourning for Secretary Plunderer and commanding an immediate cessation of American hostilities. Thus deprived of his only support, Putin pretended that he had never authorized an invasion of Hokkaido, and the North Korean soldiers returned to Sakhalin Island. The Prime Minister signed a declaration from the Japanese Diet commanding the same things in Japan. They also decreed that Secretary Plunderer should be included in the Japanese historical records of honor suicides, alongside the forty-seven *rōnin* in the *Chūshingura*.

Hanao and I watched the news reports from the monitor in the lobby.

One American reporter said, "The widow of Minoru Heike cannot be reached for comment."

I turned to Hanao and said, "We have to find her."

"How can we possibly know where she is?" he asked.

"I think I might know," I said, then told him how I had met her at Higashiyama.

Chapter 16

"Yes, I believe that is she," said Hanao, his English better than mine. "The woman's face is hidden, but we can go over and talk with her. She might be glad to see us."

We were at the Higashiyama Onsen, the spa near the temple and villages. When Hanao identified himself at the gate as Sumiko's brother, the guards confirmed that Mrs. Heike was at the spa but had asked to not see any visitors.

"Very well," said Hanao. "We will just walk around the grounds."

We started walking toward the woman we thought might be Sumiko.

"I have one more story to tell you," I told Hanao. "From it, you will see why I consider it to be so important to find Sumiko as soon as possible. She will not be glad to see us, Hanao.

"Sumiko's husband was a strikingly important and passionately traditional Japanese man," I began. "And, as you know better than I, when a man dies, sometimes his wife commits suicide."

"But that is the old Japan," said Hanao. "Sumiko and I were not raised that way."

"Neither was Mochimoto-sensei," I said.

"Who is that?"

"You mean, was. When I was an undergraduate at a coastal California university, I took Japanese language classes. Mrs. Toriko Michimoto was my instructor. Though an instructor, not a professor, Michimoto was still *sensei*, honored teacher. She was from Japan, but was American in almost every way. We all loved her. For her birthday one year, we threw her a party, with lots of *mochi* and green tea ice cream. She laughed the whole time and hugged each of us.

"Then her husband, a mathematics professor, died of cancer.

"The next day, the body of a Japanese woman was found dead in the surf. It was Michimoto-sensei, who had walked out into the waves and drowned herself. (24) Nobody understood why she had done this. We walked around dazed. It was almost the only time I have ever cried."

"I know Sumiko, and do not believe she would kill herself." Hanao spoke firmly.

"Her marriage to Minoru Heike changed her," I said. "You know this is true."

We drew closer to the woman who sat on a stone bench.

"That's not her," said Hanao.

"You're right," I said. "But we should keep looking."

We walked all around the onsen grounds several times. "She's probably in the bath right now, trying to relax," said Hanao.

Then we saw a woman at the top of a cliff.

"How did the woman get there?" asked Hanao. "There is no trail that leads up there."

But both Hanao and I realized at once that it had to be Sumiko.

"She's going to jump," I said. "We have to stop her."

Hanao agreed and we looked for a trail that led up the mountain. The trail got steeper and steeper. The volcanic rock had degraded into slick mud, and we had to grab hold of bamboo stalks and beech branches to keep from slipping back down. When the trail started back down the other side, we knew that we would have to leave the trail to find the cliff. In the declining light of afternoon, we could barely tell in which direction there might be some clear sky. We found an opening in the forest canopy, which gave us a view of the tiled roofs and gardens below, but we could see no cliff.

Sweaty and streaked with mud, we headed back down the other side of the mountain. Then, off to the side, I caught sight of a little bit of fabric. It was a woman in a kimono. Sumiko. I ran as fast as I could, tripping over branches, scratching my face in the underbrush, wheezing with fatigue. I could not hear Hanao, but I knew he was right behind me.

I saw Sumiko stand up and look down the cliff face and the roiling waters of a creek below.

I started to call to her, but my throat was congested.

I reached her the moment she was stepping off the cliff. I grabbed her legs and held them tightly through the rough kimono fabric. My forward momentum would merely have launched both of us into the air, but Hanao grabbed a sturdy pine trunk and my ankle. Sumiko kicked me. She was powerful. Hanao pulled me back up the cliff, where I scrambled to safety, still holding to Sumiko but now with only one hand. I tumbled into grass as Hanao grasped his sister's body and pulled her to safety.

Sumiko's face came alive out of its depression. "Hanao?"

"Sumiko," he said. I could see nothing but heard every word and every breath, as if my senses were heightened.

She panted as she sat on the ground. "My mind was clear, Hanao. I was ready to die."

"No, you weren't," said Hanao. "Not without Jesus you weren't."

"How did you find me?" she asked with her rasping voice.

"Jesus," he said, then he fainted.

She looked over and saw me propped up on one elbow. She came to me and touched my shoulder. "Kome-san?"

I forced myself into a sitting position. "Sumiko. I had to save you. You helped to save me."

"What? When did I save you?"

"When I was ill, at Hanao's house. You were in my dreams. But it turns out, Hanao said, that you were actually with me."

"Yes, I was."

"You held my hand."

"I did."

"You told me that I needed to go back to my life, that there was much unfinished business that I needed to do. You said that there were seeds that needed to grow. That there were people

who needed my help. It was not yet my time to die. And that is what I am telling you right now. You have to go back and live."

Colors started to swim before my eyes. Then I heard Hanao moving and he said, "Sumiko, we love you. Please come back to us. Jesus has spared your life for a purpose."

Soon we all stood together. I put my trembling hand on her shoulder. "Sumiko, I love you. You told me to forget about you, but I could not." She held my small hand in her large one. We kissed.

Chapter 17

On the cliff, the combined weight of Sumiko and myself sprained Hanao's shoulder and it hurt him, and limited his arm movement, for a long time after we returned to his home. He could not carry his baby girl Akako, red child, when she was born later that year. Akako had a devoted aunt, and soon she also had a devoted uncle. I resigned my job at P.C., and returned briefly to America to sell most of my belongings, sending only a few to Japan. I bring in some money from free-lance writing, but all of us live comfortably on Sumiko's massive inheritance as Minoru's sole heir. We have lost count of how many trees, and how many forests, we have planted on devastated plots of urban land. Years later, the day came when Akako, as her little cousin watched, was able to pat down the soil around an oak seedling and water it.

Author's Notes to Deru Kugi

This novel is based on my extensive experience. I was a high school exchange student to Japan. I studied Japanese history and the Japanese language when I was an undergraduate student. I wrote to and received letters from many Japanese acquaintances. I have read and reviewed numerous books about Japan. The story of Sumiko (not including the war part) is almost real.

Chapter 1

A movie that shows the neglected Japanese housewife is *Shall We Dance?,* which is a Japanese movie despite the English title.

Chapter 2

When I was on a tourist boat in Puget Sound in 1993, west of Seattle, the tour guide pointed to a tall black skyscraper and said, "That one building has more lawyers than the whole nation of Japan."

Chapter 3, the story *Balloons*:

1. The rice paper balloons were real. My Mom saw one of these balloons as it blew inland from the Pacific Ocean in southern California about 1944.
2. White hatred against nisei (second generation Japanese Americans) was real, though by the time I was in high school, the sansei (third generation) were generally accepted in white society.
3. These balloons were not quite the only Japanese attack on the American mainland. An unexploded bomb landed on a cliff near Santa Barbara, at a location currently in Sandpiper Golf Course.
4. Japanese Americans often gave their children American names difficult to pronounce in Japanese, such as Leslie and Tamlyn.

Chapter 5

The Attic War was published in *Japanophile* in 1998.

Something like the story of *Balloons* actually happened. A family on a picnic in Washington state found an unexploded bomb from a Japanese balloon, touched it, and it exploded.

0Chapter 6

You can hear *Song of the Seashore* at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9CGsBr9jOA&list=RDN9CGsBr9jOA&start_radio=1.

I started a concert band arrangement of *Itsuki no Komori Uta* one time. The melody was a solo horn in F, playing loud, high, and slow. The only accompaniment was tubular bells. I never finished the arrangement.

The translation of "shit lard-ass" is thanks to *Beyond Polite Japanese*, by Akihiko Yonekawa.

Chapter 7

"Trump speaks out on his desire to annex Canada": Time magazine, https://time.com/7282450/trump-annex-canada-economy-recession-upholding-the-constitution/. And NBC News, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-quest-conquer-canada-confusing-everyone-rcna195657.

Chapter 9

I got the translations of belly-slitting and gastrocision from Dr. Henry D. Smith, at that time at the University of California. I took his course, "The Samurai Tradition in Japanese History."

On the Narrow Road by Lesley Downer describes a westerner's attempt to retrace Basho's steps.

I made up the part about the skimpily-clad ama divers.

Chapter 10

See *The Green Archipelago: Forestry in Pre-Industrial Japan* (1998) by Conrad Totman describes Japanese forest management.

See *Trees and Man: The Forest in the Middle Ages* (1990) by Roland Bechmann describes European forests.

For more information about Japan destroying tropical forests, see *Shadows in the Forest: Japan and the Politics of Timber in Southeast Asia* (1997) by Peter Dauvergne.

Chapter 11

The story about the pickled beets may be an urban legend. See https://www.businessinsider.com/kyiv-grandma-took-down-ussian-drone-with-jar-tomato-pickles-2022-3.

According to Wikipedia, a quarter of a million Russian soldiers have been killed and almost three quarters of a million have been wounded as of the middle of 2025.

See *Escape from Camp 14* (2012) by Blaine Harden tells a lot about North Korea.

Chapter 13

Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

Chapter 14

Thirty six views of Mt. Fuji, Cathy N. Davidson.

Chapter 16

This suicide actually happened, as described here, in 1990. I have changed the person's name. You can also read a similar account in T. Coraghessan Boyle's *East Is East.*

About the Author

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a million and a half views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website https://stanleyrice.org/.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.