Shakuhachi

尺八

A Novel

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Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine,
or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo.

—Matsuo Basho, *haiku* writer and diarist (1644–1694)

Prologue *Obon* (Yukiko)

The gods do not reply to our cries of why—they simply point the way. In the season of *Obon*, when cicadas shrill their listless song along the river, when rice stalks hang heavy with heat and thickening grain, when children race to graves with buckets of water and chrysanthemums, we come together as one—the living, the ancestors, and the gods. We remember our dead and we dance. We tell the story of the son who found his mother's soul in the realms of hell, who turned to Buddha for guidance, who created a feast of offerings. Buddha accepted his offerings and released the boy's mother. We recite the tale of Mokuren—the boy whose devotion freed his mother—to remind us of courage and endurance.

Like all boys, Kenji wriggled through the storytelling and dashed toward the bonfires and the *taiko* drums and the flutes when it was done. What child ever understands the gift of life? But even before the war, before the parades and the flames and the hunger and the graves, my thoughts lingered on the mother.

Sometimes the gods point the path to hell. And we must go.

Chapter One: Truth (Kenji)

Wednesday, April 3, 1974
Muto Animation Studio
Koenji, Tokyo

Kenji's eyes flicked from frame to frame; his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. His boss—who owned the company and directed the animation—had already approved the work, but Kenji had stayed through the night, re-examining each sketch. A boy drowning in a river. He didn't often obsess about his work, but something about the sequence disturbed him. Fiddling with the key light, back light and fill light had not solved the problem, so he spent the night tweaking less important details. The discomfort persisted. He took the handful of cel paper from the light table and returned to his desk. For the hundredth time he lifted the lower, right-hand corner and released the drawings from back to front, watching the scene of the river as it raged through the transparent paper.

The edge of the bank, undercut by swollen water and bearing the weight of a boy, shifts and slides. The world lurches. The boy's fingers sink into clods of earth, but he cannot stop his fall. The black water grips him hard, shocks the breath from his chest, and yanks him under. The current tosses, tips, and flips him. He is completely still, then completely in motion. His side slams against a tree trunk. Air trails from his mouth in bubbles. His head jerks above water. He

drags an arm up and reaches for a branch. Hands grab and pull him from above, wresting him from the current.

The shuffle of cel paper stopped as Kenji came to the end of the completed scene. The character of the river was too tame. *It needs more coil and thrash, like a wounded eel*, he thought. He rested a gloved hand on the drawing, while the other hand worked the arc and spin of water. College friends still shook their heads, dismissing his job as a waste of time and talent. Kenji knew he would be making more money if he had followed them into interviews with Mitsubishi, Sumitomo or Matsushita. But he also knew that he wouldn't be drawing every day.

He stretched and looked around the cramped, stale office. Rain beat on the windows. The luminescent clock glowed 6:14. He would be alone for another half hour. Feeling for the familiar lump in his breast pocket, Kenji fished out a Hi-Lite. He flicked the lighter, cupped the warmth, inhaled, and savored the dark burst of smoke in his lungs. The cigarette dangled from his lips as he stared at the thin metal ash tray on his desk. Blackened stubs and gray-white ash brimmed over the grooved edges. He reached past the ash tray and tapped his cigarette into the ceramic pot of the only plant in the office. One of the young editors fussed over the scraggly thing daily. She never commented on the cigarette ash scattered on the soil; instead she scraped out the ash, narrowed her eyes at him, threw it away, and watered the plant. Kenji was sure that over time this dance would lead to bed. He yawned. Balancing the ash tray carefully, he tipped the contents into a neat pile at the base of the plant.

His stomach rumbled. Kenji stood and walked to the closet that functioned as a miniature kitchen. Stacks of Nissin Cup Noodle towered precariously on one side. The instant noodles, cheap and convenient, had quickly become a favorite meal in the studio over the past year. A gas stove took up most of the space beneath the light from a bare bulb. A small refrigerator wheezed to one side. Kenji set a pot of water to boil.

He couldn't remember the last time he had spent the night in the office to finish a project. Takahashi would only grunt later in the morning when Kenji showed him the work. His boss expressed himself either through snorts or long,

indrawn hissing breaths squeezed between square tongue and teeth. Kenji doubted his boss would notice that he was wearing the same shirt and had not showered. Most days Takahashi arrived rumpled and disgruntled, despite being married. The water boiled over the blue gas flame and Kenji poured it quickly over the rigid noodles. He tore the top off the sesame oil packet and added it to the water. Finally he opened a packet of seasonings. The brown dust, masquerading as spice, floated on the surface. Salt wafted up in the steam.

His mouth watered, but he gagged. Chills prickled down his neck and a series of images flooded his mind. Water. Body thumping. Head dizzy. World upside down. Then Granny Nobu's soup. The soup she made for him after Takayama, their neighbor, plucked him from the river and ran him home, plastered like seaweed down Takayama's back. Kenji recalled the scent of earth in the steaming bowl she put to his lips: shiitake and burdock, *konbu* and bamboo shoot. And her eyes. Her eyes always reminded him of the stones in the temple pond—round, russet shadows where carp hid to escape the noonday sun. She had said something to him.

So the river spirit took you for a ride, eh? What did the river teach you?

Her cackle filled his mind. He had just begun living with her when he had almost drowned. *What did the river teach you?* What did that mean?

He shook his head, as if to clear his mind. Granny Nobu had said a lot of strange things to him in his childhood. But he had set that life aside when he returned to Tokyo from art school in London. He had chosen concrete alleyways, convenience stores, and cartoon animation. Why return to hard labor and quiet nights when there was a chance he would work on a project as popular as *Tomorrow's Joe* or *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*? He poked at the noodles and felt himself relax. Nothing was wrong with the animation. It was just an old memory of nearly drowning that had kept him up all night.

Kenji carried the noodles back to his desk. He stared at the black and white photographs of bees, preparing himself for a scene change. It would be good to draw something besides a river. As he leaned in to eat, movement caught his peripheral vision. It was his reflection. He always kept a mirror attached to his

desk. It was his most valuable tool, because it helped him overcome his greatest weakness: lip synching.

When he couldn't remember how lips looked forming certain sounds, he consulted his own face. He had spent countless hours looking like a fool in front of the mirror. But it was only by watching the changing shape of his own mouth that he had any hope of rendering convincing mouth movements. Lip synching had always been the hardest part of animation for him, and he often left the mouth drawings off the main drawings and placed them on overlay cels later.

Rubbing his chin he squinted at the mirror. Two days without shaving had darkened his square jaw. Shadows curved beneath his eyes and gave him a raccoon-like look. As he peered more closely he saw that his 37 years were beginning to sketch faint lines on his forehead. But his hair was jet-black and thick, his eyebrows solid and straight. He pulled a face at himself. *Nothing some cold water and a shave won't fix.*

* * *

A half hour later, the empty Nissin noodle bowl stood empty at his elbow. The door opened and the two youngest staff members, Tomohiro and Hiroshi, tumbled into the studio, shaking water from their umbrellas. They had started at the studio a year ago, and after a three month training period they settled in as in-betweeners. Their job was to take key animation and break movements into sequenced components. Under their nimble fingers a single step became seven sketches of a leg lifting incrementally through the air. A jump became a series of rolling loops. A laugh became a stop-action caricature of human joy. They arrived and left together, argued like children, and played like a pair of otters. It would be easy to imagine them as brothers if they weren't so different. Tomohiro's broad face and unusual height broadcast his northern ancestors, while Hiroshi's slight build and delicate features hinted at a more sophisticated heritage.

Next month the studio would hire new college graduates, and both young men would move up to mentor status. Anticipation of their elevated status made them relaxed, more familiar. Kenji was their senior, their *sempai*, but not an

intimidating one. He noted the look of surprise on both their faces as they examined his shirt.

"Look who's here, working hard!" Tomohiro grinned. "Hey, are you coming to the labor union meeting tonight?" They jostled around him.

Kenji shook his head. "No."

Tomohiro swung one of the neighboring wooden chairs around, straddled it, and sat facing Kenji with an exaggerated look of concern on his face. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and mumbled past the wagging end.

"If you stay here all night and you don't go to meetings, how are you ever going to find a woman?"

Kenji had always considered it an advantage of his job that at his age no one was pestering him to get married. Animation was just enough out of the mainstream that he didn't have a busy-body section chief commenting on his single status and implying his future in the company would be dim if he didn't marry. He dated women once and awhile. Some were office lady colleagues of old college friends. Others were loosely associated with animation—painters, editors, proofers. Nothing lasted. It seemed to him that all women wore tight, high-pitched shoes, which eventually led to tight, high-pitched demands. And his own prospects as an animator did little to attract a serious relationship. Most women wanted a man with a solid job in a well-known firm with the guarantee of long hours and predictable promotions. He had slept with women, but only in love hotels.

Tomohiro was looking at him uncertainly, as if Kenji's prolonged silence had unsettled him. Kenji grimaced, then shrugged.

"I don't need a woman, and I've already done my share of union work. It's your turn."

"Did you see who is running for the Liberal Democratic Party?" Hiroshi seemed eager to change the subject.

Kenji shook his head.

"Not interested. The LDP runs everything and they're all crooks."

Kenji watched the two young men exchange looks. He sounded cynical; he *was* cynical. These two had been sucking at their mother's breasts when the streets shook with student protests over the American Security Treaty in 1960. But then Mishima had committed suicide. Japanese terrorists staged the Lod Airport Massacre. Students held other students hostage at Asama-Sanso. Kenji's thrill at being part of a movement for the people had died in the face of division, violence, and ineffectiveness. Now he pushed subversive ideas through comics.

Hiroshi slapped down the day's newspaper so Kenji could see the front page. Yokoi. Kenji recognized him immediately because this man had returned to Japan just a few years ago as an instant celebrity. Shoichi Yokoi—the World War II soldier who had survived almost thirty years in a cave dug beneath a bamboo grove in Guam, eating rats, spearing fish, and shaping clothes from hibiscus bark. Long after the war ended Yokoi had stayed in Guam and kept fighting in the name of an emperor who had turned to poetry and oceanography. Kenji shook his head again at the man's stubbornness. Yokoi had lived that way for almost 30 years. Then, two years ago, some student had coaxed Yokoi out of his cave at last, and the soldier had finally returned to Japan. Kenji still remembered the TV footage that had showed Yokoi, gaunt and in wheelchair, clutching a ten thousand yen bill in one hand and waving a Japanese flag with the other. "It is with much embarrassment that I have returned alive," he had said. Kenji stared at the newspaper picture and noticed that Yokoi had not gained much weight since his return, but he was still waving a flag.

According to the article, Yokoi was running for a seat in the Upper House of the Diet. And he wasn't shy about his views. Kenji skimmed Yokoi's quotes, then read out loud, "Perhaps the Emperor is no longer considered a living god to some, but to me he is sacred. In this new Japan, children defy their parents, women are no longer gentle and calm, and youngsters speak only of freedom and democracy. College students are only a bunch of spoiled brats." Kenji paused and raised his eyebrows.

Tomohiro snorted. "My girlfriend won't be happy if he is elected. He's the guy who says Japanese women screech like apes and don't listen to their men anymore."

Hiroshi grinned. “My mother loves him. She watches his TV show, ‘Yokoi and the Seven Beauties’ all the time. She says she’s learned a lot about how to survive in the jungle. As if she’s suddenly going to find herself grilling rats to live!”

The two young men laughed. Kenji did not.

The door opened again, and this time it was Takahashi. Kenji noted how swiftly the two young men jumped to their feet, faces somber and serious as they bowed and greeted their boss with a vigorous chorus of “Good morning!” Takahashi charged by them. Rain dripped off his squashed beret. His bristling gray-and-white eyebrows bunched together in a frown. He bellowed his standard greeting.

“Work, work, work!” He waved his arms. “Draw, draw, draw!”

Both young men sprinted to their desks. *Even otters move when the bald eagle flies in,* thought Kenji. Kenji entertained no illusions about how he was viewed in the office. An old guy who had not made it past animator status, who rarely put in long hours, who sometimes left work before scenes were completed, who excused himself from group karaoke outings, who sat through the year-end *bonenkai* parties saying as little as possible and smoking solidly between sips of Suntory whiskey.

Kenji went back to the kitchen for a cup of green tea. Cupboards lined the office walls. At the far end of the room, light boxes gleamed—each one plastered with initial landscapes for the new production: meadows, forests, blocks of hexagons mimicking the interior of a beehive. He returned to his desk and sipped his tea as he stared at pictures of *Apis cerana japonica*—the Japanese mountain bee. Because of his seniority he was the lead animator on this new production, but he had not seen a living bee in a long time. The grainy, black and white 35 mm reels of film he excavated from the science department basement at Tokyo University weren’t helpful. Maybe he would try to get out of Tokyo for a day or two, head up to the village in the spring. Maybe he would sit in the meadow behind Granny Nobu’s hut, where he could watch the bees weave through blooming dogwood and honey lotus. *Maybe*.

He wouldn't be going there any time soon, though. April in the village was far too cold. He pulled out a blank page. He stared at it. Kenji knew from experience that once he found that first, essential detail the rest of the work would emerge around it. He allowed his pencil to sketch at random. But what emerged again and again was not a bee, but a beehive. Each time he started over, it reappeared. Then he started drawing human bodies with beehives over their heads. He shoved the page to the side and prepared to start again. It happened sometimes, this inexplicable urge to draw nonsense—odd, meaningless things he didn't understand.

"Hey!"

Tomohiro, who had been walking by, leaned in over his shoulder. "That looks like those guys in the old samurai soap operas—you know, those secret guys whose faces you never see, but they always fight off the thieves and bandits and win."

Kenji stared at the figures. Tomohiro was right. There was a name for that character, but he couldn't recall it. He turned to a fresh page and began to draw again. Again beehives on heads. He frowned. *Komusō*. Kenji tapped his finger on the image, trying to remember everything he had ever heard about these men. They wore beehive-shaped hats made of straw, traveled the country begging for alms, and slept on mats out in the open. They were part of some Buddhist sect from a long time ago—back in the Edo period. Hundreds of years ago. There was something else he couldn't remember. Some connection he had not made. Rubbing the side of his head as if his elementary school teacher had just smacked him, Kenji crumpled up his odd sketches. Whatever this was, he didn't have time for it right now.

He did not look up again until he heard Tomohiro call his name from his desk. Takahashi was too cheap to hire a secretary, so the junior members of staff took phone calls.

"Nakagawa-san," he called out politely, using Kenji's last name, "There's a phone call for you."

Kenji took the phone and walked into the conference room, the twisting white cord stretched behind him. He stared out the windows at the buildings across the street, blurred with rain.

"*Moshi, moshi.*"

"*Nakagawa-san desu ka?*" It was a woman's voice, asking for him. Her accent gave her away as foreigner.

"*Hai, Nakagawa desu.*" He paused, then said, "I speak English if that is easier."

None of his high school English classes had helped him with conversation, but two years in England and business trips to New York did the trick. She sounded relieved.

"Thank you. I am Sister Brigitte, the headmistress of the Sacred Heart School."

Kenji frowned. A private girls' school. Somewhere in the Azabu neighborhood of Tokyo. For some reason he recalled that the Empress Kyoko was connected to the school.

"Yes, I know the school."

"Mr. Nakagawa, it is difficult to know where to begin. It is about one of our Sisters."

He searched for something interesting out in the rain-wet world, but only saw slick umbrellas bobbing along the alley.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know anything about anyone who works at your school. Excuse me, but I have to… "

"Mr. Nakagawa. I am holding a picture in my hand of a young boy. He is standing with a woman next to a chrysanthemum display. On the back is written, 'Kenji Nakagawa and Yukiko Nakagawa, November 15, 1943' along with an address in Niigata. We found this picture among our Sister's possessions. We made inquiries. I believe you might be that little boy. I believe that our Sister may have been your mother."

The clock ticked on the wall. Takahashi chastised Tomohiro for sloppy work. A train rumbled along elevated tracks. Kenji could barely shape the words.

"You have the wrong person. My mother died almost thirty years ago."

Chapter Two: Flame (Yukiko)

March 9, 1945
Nihonbashi District, Tokyo

Yukiko shivered. She stood at her window and gazed down the short, pebbled stone path to the narrow sidewalk. Late winter snow mixed with the grimy ash of recent bombings and edged window ledges, tiled roofs, and door frames. The boarded-up windows of the tofu stall across the street gaped at her, painted black—an air raid regulation requirement. Two weeks and no coal distribution. Silence slumped across the narrow street, as if the gray wear of war had erased all life. No laughter. No scolding. No taunts or calls or cries.

Neighbors with relatives or connections in the country had left months ago. In the nine contiguous homes that formed her neighborhood association, only six families remained. Fourteen people—including two babies—were expected to defend those homes against fire and bombs. Yukiko leaned her forehead against the vertical edge of the window. She missed the smell of hot oil and fish at night from her neighbor's homes, the clatter of cooking pans, the calls of children darting through the narrow passages between homes.

She touched the thick sash at her waist and she closed her eyes. Everyday she unwound the cloth once and gazed at her one remaining treasure—the photograph of her son standing beside her. She kept the picture bound to her

body, so that everywhere she went Kenji went with her. In the photograph he stood beside her, dressed in the same somber, ceremonial kimono her husband had worn for his five-year-old celebration picture. But Jiro was absent from what should have been a family portrait. Yukiko had sent a copy of the picture to her husband in China, where he had been stationed with the Imperial Japanese Army. The picture had not been returned with his other possessions, so she did not know if he ever saw it. She hoped so.

Her body ached. She opened her eyes, gripped the bottom edge of the window and felt the half-healed cut across the back of her hand pull open. Her fingers were flaking skin and swollen joints. Muscles in her back and shoulders cramped from mandatory air raid drills. For eight months now, since the fall of Saipan, all households sent a representative to participate in fire-fighting drills. Every practice session with water buckets and bags of sand brought new blisters and lacerations. This morning her neighborhood group had lined up and thrown buckets of water as high as they could, while civil defense coordinators had judged who could throw the highest. And at the end of yesterday's monthly meeting the head of the neighborhood association informed her that the monthly rotation of neighborhood war duties had fallen to her. Fliers to hand out. Rations to gather. Food to distribute. As if daily life were not burden enough.

Her stomach grumbled and she looked down at the counter top. She had stood in line for a distribution of rice gruel in the morning and tonight she would make soup from her hoarded bits of shriveled green onion and *daikon* radish. She was almost out of charcoal, sugar, and matches. Perhaps tomorrow there would be new food distributions. Staring at a single, shrunken sweet potato and her almost empty container of *miso*, she wondered how many meals she could squeeze from them.

Yukiko poured water from a bucket into a pan to boil, lit the kerosene, and turned her gaze back out the window. Late afternoon shadows stretched from the paving stones Jiro had laid from their front door to the street the year after they married. How proud he had been of his stonework. A cloth merchant by trade, but a gardener at heart, he had created a world apart in the 1 by 2 meter space between the front door and the bamboo gate. He had found three large garden

stones in fields outside the city. Each one took an entire day to load and transport by cart. Then he had spent days determining exactly where they should rest. Together, they had gathered river rock and pebbles and scattered them between the paving stones, completing the pathway together. Yukiko touched her fingers to the chilled window, remembering the shine of sweat etched along the muscles of his back and neck.

Her husband's family came from generations of merchants who had set up shop in Nihonbashi, the ancient merchant district of Tokyo. Since the time of the Shoguns, when the bog that was now Tokyo was called Edo, Nihonbashi boasted a thriving business center. Merchants haggled over woven crepe cloth from Echigo, tangerines from Kyuushu, *keyaki* wood from Yamagata. From the time she arrived after her marriage to Jiro, Yukiko loved the flurry of activity at the fish and rice markets, the smells of cedar and paulownia from the lumber stockpiles, kimono-clad women shopping at elegant dry-goods stores and workers squatting outside storage-buildings beside the Sumida river. Nihonbashi had rumbled with the sounds of people and horses day and night. But now trolleys rolled empty and listless from Shirokiya department store to residential areas where deserted homes of wood and paper leaned into each other.

Much as the two figures she noticed shuffling down the street leaned into each other. *What brings two old country folk here*? Yukiko wondered. They wore old-fashioned, brown kimonos instead of the standard war clothing of Tokyoites—wide-legged *monpe* pants and thick, long air raid hoods. Perhaps they had come to see if there was anything to scrounge in the street.

The figures hesitated at her bamboo gate. One looked up and Yukiko stared. Shock paralyzed her. *Mother?* And behind her mother—*Father?* Yukiko's heart began to pound. *What has happened?* She wrenched the door aside and stumbled toward them, forgetting to put on sandals. Her mother reached out to her, hands shaking, eyes bright.

"Kenji?" It was all Yukiko could say, all she could croak past the hard ache in her throat. Her mother looked confused, then she understood. Her face softened. She took Yukiko's hands and squeezed them.

"Kenji is fine. We could only get tickets for two to travel. We left him with Granny Nobu."

Yukiko began to shake. For a moment she thought she might collapse. Kenji was fine. Kenji was with Granny Nobu. She closed her eyes and saw the old woman's face–the broad, brown-skinned, lined face with eyes the color of autumn chestnuts. The village healer whose hands tended the sick. Kenji was safe with her. He was safe.

Yukiko took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and remembered herself. She released the tight grip on her mother's hands. She bowed to her parents, and said formally, "Please, come in." She averted her eyes from her father as he moved past her into the entry. He did not acknowledge her in any way, nor did she expect him to.

"I am sorry," she said humbly, as her parents stepped from their wooden clogs onto the threadbare *tatami* mat. She had no inside slippers for them to wear because she had used them to patch her clothes. So they walked in stocking feet to the low table in the center of the room. Yukiko gestured her father to sit on the thin *zabuton* cushion facing the door, then she rummaged for a second cushion for her mother. As she sat down on the bare *tatami* her mind teemed with questions, even as she tried to keep her face calm. *Why have they come? How did they get here?* Train tickets were impossible to get without official or military vouchers. They must have bought them on the black market. The cost would be astronomical. And—what would her father say? Would he speak to her at all?

"I only have barley tea," she said apologetically.

Her father did not respond, but her mother inclined her head gently, so Yukiko took the water, now boiling, and poured it over a small mound of dried barley grains. She set more water on to boil for the soup, which must now serve three. Her parents' silence loomed behind her.

She had never intended to harm her father, yet her actions as a daughter were unforgivable. When she had bundled Kenji up, when she had boarded the train to Tokyo a year and a half ago, when she had left her village in the middle of marriage negotiations with Shimizu, the school teacher, she had left her parents

to face the scorn of the village alone. She had not seen or talked to her father since. His stiff posture communicated the stinging shame her departure had caused.

She brought the teapot to the table and carefully poured out half cups of tea.

Her father took his cup and sipped loudly.

If only he had listened to her. She had tried and failed to make him understand that she was not ready. How could she embrace the school teacher, Shimizu—call him husband—when the memory of Jiro lived in her?

Yukiko caught her mother's eye and saw her unspoken plea. Her mother had always been able to read her heart, but her concern was unnecessary. Yukiko had no energy for the old arguments.

"You both look healthy," she said softly.

Her father set his tea cup carefully on the table in front of him and stared at it. He did not look at her as he replied, "Kenji is well."

"Was your journey difficult?" she asked.

Her father's face remained impassive. "It was a long trip, but not as bad for us as for others."

Yukiko knew what they had seen as they came closer to the city—women and men bent beneath futons, kimonos, furniture, household items, anything they could sell to farmers for food. She felt her face flush. No doubt her parents had noticed the empty spaces in the house where there used to be furniture, clothing, wedding gifts. Tonight she would offer them her futon to share, while she slept on the floor.

"Kenji misses you," her mother said quietly.

Yukiko's throat constricted. So this was why they had come. To convince her to return to the village. Her father had come to lend his presence to her mother's appeal, knowing that nothing else could convince her that she was truly welcome back. If only they had arrived a few days before! She would have left the city to face the villagers. She would have endured the snide remarks, snickers, scornful glances and silence. But it was too late. Just this morning the factory foreman told her it was no longer possible for employees to quit, or be fired,

without permission from the government. She would need special travel papers; express train service north was being suspended. Her father had forgiven her, yet she would fail him again—they would journey home without her. As if he could hear her thoughts her father said, "*Issun saki wa yami no yo*."

Darkness lies one inch ahead.

She understood. In these dismal days, darkness was best met as a family, not alone. She bit her lips to keep from crying. Water roiled behind them, and she stood and went to prepare the soup. Ladling the watery broth and a single piece of *daikon* radish into each of the three bowls, she took her time, calming her breathing and wiping her eyes while her back was turned to her parents. Setting the first of the bowls in front of her father she bowed, then set the second bowl in front of her mother, who smiled gently.

"*Itadakimasu*," her father said, and the women softly repeated the prayer of thanks before a meal.

The knock on the door startled them all.

Yukiko stood quickly and slid the door open. Ogawa, the head of the neighborhood association, stood before her. His military sash glittered: the China Incident Medal, the Combat Wound Medal, and the 2600th Anniversary Medal. Yukiko knew them well. She had touched each one when the army sent Jiro's uniform home from China. She had laid each piece of metal carefully beside her Bereavement Medal—the only honor earned by mothers and wives during war.

Ogawa had served in China since the Marco-Polo Bridge Incident. For seven years he fought in Nanjing, Wuhan, Changsha and Shanghai. He survived, but returned to the neighborhood with a ruined knee. He walked with a lop-sided gait, yet he delivered his messages from the civil defense unit with brisk efficiency. At first his erect bearing and clear orders inspired confidence, but now many people mocked his officious manner. He pretended not to notice; instead his voice became more gruff and his orders more abrupt. He did not meet Yukiko's eyes as he bowed peremptorily and declared, "The food distribution is ready. You must go now and get it." He pointed at a rickety cart on the sidewalk. "Use that for gathering and distributing the rations."

Broth steamed on the table behind her. Ogawa turned his back and Yukiko bowed to emptiness. Wind whipped down the street and she saw him stagger, recover, then continue limping down the sidewalk. Mrs. Ajisawa, who peered across the street from her doorway, bowed to Ogawa, then crossed the street and entered the walkway. Yukiko's neighbor smiled as she bobbed her way over the paving stones.

"So busy here today, aren't you?" she exclaimed in her quavering, high-pitched voice. Her eyes slid from the cart Ogawa had left on the sidewalk to a point past Yukiko's shoulder, hoping for a glimpse of her visitors.

"I came to see if you have any thread. I have been patching old clothes and I have run out."

"No, I'm sorry," said Yukiko shaking her head.

"Ah, well, I try to mend everything, but these days it's difficult, isn't it…" Mrs. Ajisawa bobbed her head and half-turned away, favoring her good ear. Yukiko considered staying quiet, but she relented.

"The food rations are ready at the distribution center near Meiji-za theatre. Ogawa has asked me to go get them."

"Ahhh," Mrs. Ajisawa nodded, looking at the cart. "That's why he left the cart with you." She pretended to notice Yukiko's parents for the first time.

"Aren't those your honorable parents?"

Yukiko's mother rose and came to stand beside her daughter.

"Ah, yes, I remember now," Mrs. Ajisawa gushed. "I remember when you came to take young Kenji away last October."

Yukiko's mother bowed. The memory cut through Yukiko like a sword.

"But I don't think you were here…" Mrs. Ajisawa gazed beyond them into the room where Yukiko's father sat. He remained seated.

Mrs. Ajisawa blinked several times, then rambled on. "How is the boy? My, how I miss children…"

Yukiko knew the polite thing would be to invite her neighbor in, but instead she smiled, nodded, and said, "I'm sorry, but I must get ready for picking up the food…"

"Oh, of course, well, good to see you again," said Mrs. Ajisawa and she shuffled back down the path. Yukiko slid the door closed and looked back at her parents. Her father stared intently at the thin wisps of soup. Her mother had returned to the *zabuton*, hands folded in her lap. Their unasked question hung in the air.

"I'm off," she said, "*Ittekimasu*." She pulled her air raid hood over her head and turned up the collar of her work jacket. She stepped into her worn sandals and slid the door closed on her mother's low salutation, "*Itterashai*." Go safely.

Yukiko examined the cart, which Ogawa had left next to her gate. Typically used to haul buckets of sand and other fire-fighting equipment, it was also used to carry the neighborhood food rations. The cart had been caught in the last of three recent fire-bombings of the city. Scorched strips hung from the wooden side planks. The back right wheel wobbled and pulled the cart to the side, but she raised the bar, lowered the metal square around her, grasped the icy metal, and pushed. Ahead of her another figure appeared from a side street, pushing a similar cart. Yukiko focused on the cart's wheels as they rotated in front of her, large, circling Os.

O. Her blood type. At the last neighborhood association meeting Ogawa had focused on an experimental way of typing blood. Yukiko shivered again, imagining why they might need to know this information, understanding that the government was preparing them for desperate times. "Most of you are type A. Your calm, efficient, and serious natures will be helpful if the enemy attacks." Yukiko had barely suppressed a snort at Ogawa's pompous proclamation. *If?* Surely even the most dedicated emperor worshipper understood the news. Young men were graduated early and rushed to the front. Troops committed *gyokusai* in Saipan, Tinian, Leyte—drinking poison, slitting their stomachs, shooting comrades in the head. *Does Ogawa think we're all stupid?*

Mrs. Ajisawa, who always stood near her at the civil defense meetings, had cocked her head at Yukiko and clucked her tongue, as if she could hear her traitorous thoughts. Members of the neighborhood association were also supposed to watch for spies, which really meant keeping tabs on what neighbors

said and did. Yukiko knew better than to voice her thoughts. People had been sent to jail for less. "You're an O," Mrs. Ajisawa had said, peering at Yukiko's blood test result. "Well, you may be headstrong, but at least you're not 'AB'—so moody and hard to get along with." Then bombs fell over Kanda, Koto and Shiba. Even part of the Imperial Palace burned.

Now everyone was moody.

The few people on the street walked stoop-shouldered and dazed. Everyone wore the uniform of war—shapeless gray pants and long-sleeved work shirts. There were still the determined few—the nameless "black curtain" leaders, military officers, and men like Ogawa who led the civil defense units. They shouted orders and barked "Banzai!" as loudly as they had fourteen years ago, when the war in Manchuria began. *Perhaps it is easier to believe in victory if you wear a military sash with medals*, Yukiko thought as she gripped the handle and pushed.

The woman in front of her turned along the train tracks. A man rattled by her pushing a cart with two large futon mattresses, blackened and singed by fire. Anything left over from the bombings of the last months was scavenged sooner or later. She pondered the most recent rumors. Rumors of a new kind of American bomb. Bombs that didn't explode, but set fires that no water could put out. She shook her head. *Impossible*. Heading north the tracks went by Ryogoku bridge. Moving south, in her direction, the railway line passed the Meiji-za theatre, and the location of the distribution center. There was a park with a small lake. A perfect spot to park trucks carrying food from the country.

Men dressed in olive pants and shirts stood puffing on cigarettes, waving people along. Ahead she saw a twisting line. Cold seeped through her thin sandals and ragged socks. Air raid hoods obscured people's faces. She shivered. The wind promised another late winter storm.

Yukiko had learned months ago that waiting is part of the work of war. So she stood motionless, arms tight around her body, as if by gripping harder she could warm herself, anchor herself to the ground. Her cart quivered and started forward when a muttering woman behind her jostled and nudged impatiently. Perhaps Pushy Woman's father never taught her how to wait. Perhaps he never

told her that one does not make the wind, but is blown by it. The officer in charge pointed at a small crate of *daikon* and then held up a single white root and shook it. Yukiko stared at the radish, usually the ration for one meal.

"This is now the allotment for three days," he said, hands busy with the radish, cigarette dangling. "There's no fish."

"But it has been eight days," Pushy Woman cried from behind her. "How am I supposed to feed my parents on a withered radish and a bite of rice for three days?"

The man stared at the woman, tossed down the *daikon* and stood at his full height. He moved his hand to his mouth, drew in a long breath so the tip of his cigarette gleamed scarlet, and let out a long stream of smoke as he looked past Pushy Woman. Every move was casual, as if he still ate fish and tofu for dinner. Then he spoke loudly, so everyone huddled in the dispirited line could hear him.

"Everyone must make sacrifices to ensure our great victory!"

Pushy Woman muttered mutinously under her breath. Yukiko heard a different woman say softly, as if to offer some comfort: "*Shouganai*." *It can't be helped*.

Pushy Woman snorted.

Yukiko moved forward and she bowed to the distribution officer. He stood still as two men moved boxes of vegetables and packages of *miso* from the back of a truck, their arm muscles standing out in cords from the bone. Yukiko helped the men arrange the food in the cart under the glowing red eye of the man's cigarette: cabbage, *miso*, radish, and rice. Even some Adeka soap and some charcoal. The food and supplies barely filled half of the cart. How could fourteen people survive on these shriveled goods? She turned the cart toward home and in her mind she divided the supplies again and again into equal shares. And then she divided her own share into thirds. She had not asked her parents how long they would stay, but there was not food enough to sustain any of them for very long. Every dip and crack in the road's surface jarred her body and strained her arms. She stared at the ground and she counted her steps and she leaned to the left to correct the list of the cart. She navigated by cracks in the roads, so she

knew she was almost home when she saw the image of a long plum tree branch running through the broken pavement.

"Yukiko-san!" Predictably, Mrs. Ajisawa stood waiting for her in front of her gate. "Is there any fish?" Her neighbor's eyes darted to the bundles of radish and cabbage.

"No," Yukiko replied, as her shoulders sagged and the cart came to a rest to the front door.

"I was just listening to the radio," said Mrs. Ajisawa, as her eyes continued to rove over straw parcels and bundles, "and I heard there might be strong winds tonight." She cocked her head, frowning. "It looks like less food than usual. There is nothing else?"

Yukiko shook her head and looked away, but not before she saw the suspicion in her neighbor's face.

"When are your parents returning home? It must be difficult, with three people eating from one person's food allotment."

Yukiko murmured, "It is difficult for everyone."

Yukiko stacked the food bundles in her narrow entry—Mrs. Ajisawa's gaze on her back another burden. She wanted to rest, but now there were food packages to weigh and distribute. Her mother helped Yukiko measure and bundle portions of cabbage, rice, *daikon*, and *miso* for each of the remaining families in the neighborhood. They packaged every yellowed leaf, every bit of spoiled rice, even the straw wrappings. Yukiko included it all, because otherwise the measurements would be off. She knew that her neighbors would squint at their scales with eyes sharpened by hunger. They would blame her if they came up short.

Her father lit a single lamp and left it burning on the table while he went outside and circled the house. He checked for any lines of light and called out to reattach one curling corner of blackout paper at the kitchen window. Yukiko wondered if they had air raid drills in the country. She wondered if their village head walked the dark streets like the civilian defense corps did here—vigilant for any cracks of light that might attract the enemy.

Yukiko's body sagged with exhaustion, but she reloaded the cart and walked up and down the street. Each delivery brought fresh waves of disappointment at the scant food. She parked the empty cart inside the garden and looked up at the night sky. Wind plucked at her hair and chilled her face. From Mrs. Ajisawa's home across the street she could hear an NHK broadcast of a speech prepared for tomorrow's Army Day celebration. Yukiko went inside, where her mother offered her cold soup.

Yukiko drank, then set the empty bowl on the table.

"It is impossible for me to leave." She explained the new rules that her supervisor had read just that morning. Wind shook the door. Her parents stared at her empty bowl. Her father cleared his throat.

"I will go to air raid duty tomorrow morning for you."

Yukiko's eyes filled with tears. She clenched her fingers together and flinched at the pain. She turned her blistered hands over and she stared at her cracked palms and swollen finger joints. Once, Granny Nobu had traced sweeping lines on her plump girl palms and told Yukiko stories about her future. Now there were no clear lines left to follow.

"No, I will do it," she said.

Voices yelled from across the street, "Hey! I can see light through your knot holes! Cover them up!" Yukiko, still staring at her palms, wondered if enemy pilots could really see light shining through a knot hole from the sky. She felt a tight, wild desire to laugh. But if she succumbed to laughter she would begin to cry, so she pulled out bedding and made up a futon for her parents. There was no water for a bath. No one mentioned it. Yukiko did not have extra air raid hoods, so she brought the *zabuton* cushions from the table and laid them by her parents' bed. Once her parents were settled, she lay down beside them on the floor in her *monpe*, making sure her padded hood was close by. All three of them lay still and silent and sleepless—listening to each other's in and out breaths.

Yukiko curled her knees to her chest and hugged them. The sash at her waist cut into her stomach. She could not feel the edges of the black and white photograph wound into her sash, but she knew the picture was there. Closing her eyes she pictured Kenji as she did every night before she went to sleep. Her son—

eyes so solemn—standing beside her. And as the image of him rose, the memory of him leaving ached.

They had lived in Tokyo together for over a year. Then, after the collapse of the Japanese army in Saipan, the government ordered all children evacuated from the city. Her mother had come for Kenji just five months ago—in November. His eyes had rounded with delighted surprise when his grandmother had arrived, stoop-backed from years of labor in the rice fields. They had celebrated. Yukiko mixed some of her precious store of soy sauce into a whole egg for his breakfast, pouring it over freshly boiled rice. Not the usual brown rice, but *gin shari*, rice shining like silver.

Yukiko had not told him what was happening. He was, she told herself, too young. How could she begin to explain the complicated affairs of the world and her personal life to her seven-year-old son? Instead she called it a holiday, and the three of them boarded the train to Ueno, where they walked around the zoo. Yukiko remembered empty cages where bears, lions, elephants, tigers, cheetahs and pumas had paced. Long before bombs started to fall on Tokyo the government grew concerned that the animals might escape, so the zookeepers were ordered to kill all dangerous animals. From newspaper accounts and radio announcements all of Tokyo had learned how the zookeepers tearfully fed the elephants poisoned potatoes, mixed with regular ones. Too smart to eat the deadly food—with skin too thick to allow fatal injections—John, Wanly, and Tonky had hungrily performed until they could not move. It took ten days for all three elephants to starve.

Kenji was born in the year of the monkey, so they spent most of that morning watching the lithe, brown creatures swing, chew, and scratch. Then they walked back to the station. On the stairs, she had squatted in front of her son and told him he was going with his grandmother back to the village. Kenji had frowned, confused. For a moment she had regretted not preparing him.
"You must go with Grandmother," she had said, looking directly into Kenji's eyes, trying to memorize every fleck, every shade of brown.

"You must be a strong and helpful boy and I will come see you soon."

He had nodded, so serious, and told her he would help. She had said nothing more because she could no longer speak. Instead, Yukiko had pressed triangular rice cakes made from the rest of the week's rice rations into their hands and they had boarded the train. Kenji's face pull away with the train, until there was only emptiness and a cracking, grinding ache in her chest.

In the dark, beside her parents, Yukiko squeezed her eyes and hugged her knees tighter, welcoming the cutting sensation of the sash across her middle. *Think of something else. Cherry blossoms. They will be late, surely, if this long cold continues*. Wind gusted in the narrow street and rattled the entryway door.

* * *

Air raid sirens split the darkness around Yukiko. She didn't want to move. So many times the siren was a false alarm. But she fumbled for her hood and she stood. Her parents began to stir beneath the futon cover. She moved across the room, then stepped out into the entry, past the crates of food, past the buckets of sand. Her parents shuffled in the darkness behind her. "Yukiko?" Her mother's voice pitched high with fear. Yukiko slipped her feet into her sandals and grabbed her empty wooden water bucket. Her father emerged from deep shadows and stood beside her. Her mother's fingers clutched at her arm. The freezing wind cut through their clothes. The dark sky loomed; clouds skittered across the crescent moon.

Shouts rose between pulses of the siren. Yukiko stepped farther out, peering down the street first one way, then another, then she saw that they were not alone. Shapes leaned from doors and open windows. Asakusa, the nearest neighborhood to the north, pulsed red in the distance. Asakusa, where she prayed to Kannon, Goddess of Compassion, at Sensoji Temple. It was beautiful, that glowing, breathing blood line in the black night. Yukiko heard cries of wonder around her even as she began to recite the name of the Goddess. Repeating the name of the goddess was supposed to bring protection. *Namu Kanzeon*. Surely Kannon's temple burned now, in that beating crimson heart of light. Directly overhead she heard the deafening thrum of engines. Airplanes.

Za, za, za, za, za.

Slender shapes peppered the air and flames stuttered to life down the street—then flared across Mrs. Ajisawa's roof and the tofu shop. Yukiko gripped the ends of the air raid hood at her neck. Flames puddled, leapt, spread along the street. *Bombs that no water can put out*. The neighborhood emergency bell clanged. Wild shouts rose: "Fire! Fire! Form a line!" Yukiko gripped her bucket and saw her father emerge from the entry dragging bags of sand. Shouts from farther away: "It's no good! There's no water! Run! Run to the river!"

The street dissolved into chaos. People flowed past their gate. A woman ran with a blanket over her head. A man rattled by with a cart that pitched and lurched, scattering bundles into the street. Two small children clung to the inside, eyes staring into the sky. Yukiko's thoughts swirled. *Stay and defend your home!* Her mother gripped her arm. Yukiko whirled. Looked back. Spun around. Engines throbbed above her head. Staring up she saw flames reflected in fuselage. The American planes were so low! Her father called her name from some distant place.

Night became day as hot, bright wind billowed against her. People swarmed everywhere, caught in flickering light. *Where did all these people come from?* A woman ran past, one arm behind her back holding a baby, shoving people out of her way with the other. Roof tiles flew through the air and burning debris lashed Yukiko's face, finally startling her into motion. *The river, the river*. "Come!" she cried, and reached for her parents. They stumbled, the three of them, down the paving stones and into the street. *The river, the river*. Yukiko's feet traced the steps she took earlier, toward Meiji-za theatre.

People spilled around them, and first her mother's, then her father's hand gripped and slid from her elbow. Yukiko stopped and swung around: her mother had fallen. She reached out to her parents, but people streamed between them and carried them apart. Yukiko screamed and she pushed, but the crowd overcame her. Bodies and bundles buffeted her on every side, and her parents' faces were lost. As suddenly as the wave of people formed, it passed, and she was standing on the electric train track. Carts and belongings piled in heaps along the metal rails. She stared down an avenue into a raging wall of fire. Figures darted

past the wall, then rose and twirled and burst into flame. The skin of her face stretched across her cheekbones. Wind flared past her as a wailing cry built inside. *Mother! Father!*

She fell. Her knees sank into something soft—the stomach of a young woman, who shuddered and moaned on the ground, eyes staring wildly past Yukiko's shoulder. Yukiko heard the roar; she felt heat press against her back. Her eyes burned. She pushed herself up, hard, from the girl's body. The girl's fingers closed on her wrist, but Yukiko wrenched her arm away. Balls of fire bounced past them. Yukiko did not wait and she did not turn when screams erupted behind her and heat raked her back.

Yukiko ran in the only direction left to run: the large white bulk of the Meiji-za theatre, toward the Sumida river. Gasping, she pushed toward the door with a surge of people who thronged in front of the huge building. But then people cried out from the doors: *There's no room! There's no room!* She pushed against the bodies around her, trying to think, trying to see where she was. She stumbled toward the park and the lake half-filled with water. *Run*. Her air raid hood and hair streamed out behind her in the wind. *Run*. Fire snapped at the ends of her hair, crackled and blazed across her neck and face. *Run*.

An acrid, bitter scent filled her nose. Clawing at her head, she tried to beat the flames from her hair. She staggered and she fell and she slid to the river. She plunged into the water and rose, gasping. Water rolled down her skin, warm and thick. A woman shoved past her, water streaming down her body, screaming, "They're drowning!" Yukiko looked out across the black, fire-blooded water and saw dark shapes pushing, plunging, and floating farther out in the Sumida. She groped her way up the bank. Her head throbbed. She tried to stand, but knees struck her face. Feet trampled her. She crawled.

To stop was to die, so she forced herself forward. Her fingers scrabbled at the concrete edge of a pipe. She could smell excrement mixed with mud and smoke as she heaved herself into the sewer. Yukiko lay her cheek in the damp muck and gagged. Her eyelids stuck together. She tried to wipe them with the back of her hand and then she squinted down the pipe. White eyes stared back at her from deep inside.

Yukiko pulled herself toward the face, away from the heat. After a few dragging movements she looked up again, and saw a child hunched beside a woman who rocked and crooned, cradling a bundle in her lap. Yukiko watched as if in a dream as the woman dazedly scooped a handful of muck and smeared it on the bundle, then on her own face.

"Put mud on your face and you won't burn," she heard the woman say, but the squatting child did not move. The woman mumbled again, and Yukiko recognized the sounds as a lullaby. Yukiko tried to join her, but her lips were thick and numb. The words and the tune formed in her mind, but shrieks and screams spiraled from the sewer entrance and drowned all thought.

Yukiko prayed to Kannon, the Compassionate One who Hears the Cries of the World. *Namu Kanzeon. Namu Kanzeon. Namu Kanzeon*. Heat pressed her body to the ground. Her eyes gummed shut. Her raw scalp ached. Yet she begged to live. Even as the sweet stench of roasting bodies twisted her stomach and she vomited. Even as she choked on the acid in her mouth. Even as she sank to the ground and the world grew black—Yukiko yearned for life.

Chapter 3: River Spirit (Granny Nobu)

Yayohi, Showa 20
Month of Grass Grows Dense, 20th year of the Showa Emperor
March, 1945
Urasa, Niigata Prefecture

People arrived at my gate from the village below and from towns beyond the mountain paths. No one appeared by accident. All were students of fate, although few understood this. Consumed by the forces that drove them—illness, injury, insult—they rarely understood that what brought them to me were patterns. Patterns of suffering, whose symptoms shape-shifted. They came for healing, but my true task was to see the designs, listen for the threads that tangled, then find ways to weave those strands more harmoniously in their lives.

So when the Tanaka family arrived in the springtime of the last year of the long war—the grandparents and the grandson and the aching space that was the absent mother—I met them with tea, soup, and an ear for their souls. I prayed for the help of my guides and the blessings of the gods. I watched for frayed patterns and broken threads.

I could read the grandfather, Seibei Tanaka, for I had known his eyes since he was a young boy. Discipline and hard work had kept his mind sharp and his

body lean. He was not mean-spirited by nature, but the war had sapped him. Fear thinned his blood. He sat close to his wife, Michiko, yet I could tell by the angles between them that they no longer agreed on many things. I did not know the curve of her childhood, because she had come from over the mountains to our village. But I knew of her life as a woman, and her struggle to anchor her missing daughter Yukiko to the heart of their home. Her love for her grandson flowed bright around him and bound them together, although he stayed silent the entire time. The closeness between grandson and grandmother cast a shadow on Seibei, who clasped his love for his grandson close to his chest, as if to protect it.

Michiko spoke first.

"We have tickets to go to Tokyo. Will you please watch over Kenji while we are away?"

Speaking first, before her husband, sharpened the pattern. The shock of his daughter's unseemly behavior had roused fear and anger in Seibi, but Michiko had developed greater resolve. She wanted to see her daughter again, and she had convinced her husband to come with her.

Kenji was more difficult to perceive. His smooth face never betrayed a single emotion. For a child I was struck by how still he sat. Only his fingers moved—gripping, then releasing the frayed edge of his cotton shirt. The boy barely breathed. No pattern. No sound. I could not see, but I agreed.

Our first day together was a quiet one. He answered politely and he helped when asked, but he kept to the shadows. The next morning he bowed and murmured, "I'm off!" as he left for school. After school he walked home alone and when he arrived at the door he called out a soft, "I'm home" to let me know he had returned. He ate and helped and diligently copied his *kanji*, learning the Chinese characters for "place," "cut," and "black". Another day passed and there was no news. I could see how the silence leaked his energy, his *seimeiryoku*. Each hour that passed after his grandparents left seemed to drain more of his life force. I worried. A body without life force invites sickness, accident, disaster. He slipped away to school early in the morning and returned only when evening shadows fell. I did not know where he was going, but I never saw him with other children.

I decided not to press him, believing it best for him to have time and space of his own.

So I was gazing down the path, watching for him, long after I expected him home for dinner, when the earth began to shake. To jolt. Thumping, shifting, shaking on and on and on. Rumbling. Tremors. Heaved to my knees. Eyes squeezed. Prayer. *Namu Kanzeon. Namu Kanzeon. Namu Kanzeon.*

When the earth stopped jerking, I rose to my feet and stumbled to the gate, wondering where the boy had been. I scanned the village for signs of smoke or fire. Long moments passed. I stood stiff until I saw my neighbor Takayama staggering up the road. Kenji hung down his back. Water streamed from his hair, his fingertips, his blue lips.

"He was kneeling at the river's edge when the earthquake came," gasped Takayama, as I urged him into the hut, pulling out bedding and cloth. "I saw the bank give way. He fell into the river."

I hastily arranged bedding by the fire-pit and Takayama laid Kenji down gently. I could feel the boy's breath, light, against my cheek.

"Boil water."

While Takayama stoked the fire, I placed my hands over Kenji's eyes and felt the rush of the river spirit in him. Sweeping. Tumbling. Thrusting through. I chanted and prayed, holding a still space in the midst of the tumultuous assault. The water element inside him swelled with the power of the boy's unspoken grief and confusion. His pain coursed through him, carving channels through his bones.

Takayama huddled by the door, uncertain. There was nothing left for him to help with, but still he waited. I bowed and thanked him for saving Kenji's life.

"No, no," he mumbled, his eyes darting between the boy and his own blackened toes. I knew that he did not see Kenji on the bedding by the fire. Instead, he recalled the white face of his own son, when Koichiro had lain where Kenji lay now. Takayama's son had returned from the war in China with a stump instead of an arm and black chips for eyes. Takayama had brought Koichiro to me soon after his arrival home, and I knew he still served his son herbs for dreamless

sleep. Bowing, Takayama backed out the door. I examined Kenji's face, searching for the healing that might serve this boy in this moment.

To placate the river spirit, to convince it to leave the boy, I needed to feed it. What is nourished will release. My teacher always warned that forcing the body creates more pain. I prayed now for her guidance. *Speak with the imbalance*, she counseled*, listen to what it says*. So I listened to the rush of the river bursting through the hut. I heard the need. To balance the damp and the cold of the river energy I fed Kenji the dry and the heat. In boiling water I stirred yang foods: salt, scallions, mustard greens. Then we talked together, the river spirit and I, through the night.

The next morning the river was gone. The boy sat upright on his futon, examining the dull purple-brown bruise stretched across his rib cage.

"So the river spirit took you for a ride," I said, pouring hot water over roasted barley, preparing the tea. Kenji nodded.

"What did the river teach you?" I asked, handing him a steaming mug.

He bowed his thanks, then he raised his eyes to mine and touched his throat. He shook his head. He would not—or could not—speak. His voice had vanished.

Only in listening with the heart can the stir of the spirit be heard. So I learned to understand him without words, to read his thoughts as they expressed through his face, his hands, his movements. I saw how he watched and how he listened. He no longer asked questions: he waited with them until they answered themselves. I also waited with a question. But when I threw the mugwort sticks the response was clouded, as it had been the first day he stepped through my gate. His path remained obscure, so I waited to see what would come of the silence.

* * *

That night I dreamed of a laughing Buddha. The Buddha danced and pranced and held his fat stomach with two hands while he jiggled all over. In my dream I bowed, for even in sleep I recognized this as *reimu*, a divine dream. The

Buddha chuckled and asked, “Do you know this?” He held out a length of bamboo. Then he said, “Go. Go and bring back two voices.” A single tear slid down his smiling cheek and I thought I might break with the weight of his grief.

I woke in complete darkness. As quietly as I could I gathered rice, a shovel, a saw. Kenji lay above, in the triangular space beneath the thatch, curled beneath thick layers of winter futons. The vision throbbed through my body. There was no moon to light the snow, but I knew the way. My snowshoes scratched across crystalline snow. Wind picked at my rice-straw coat and leggings. The tools weighed down my shoulders. I trembled as much from the burrowing grief of the dream as the bitter chill of black sky and frozen earth.

I knew where I was going, although I did not know why. My path led to the bamboo grove, despite the snow, the cold, the gusting storm. Generations of villagers had walked this way. In spring they came to harvest bamboo and repair winter-damaged gates and fences. As cicadas buzzed in summer heat, women arrived with boxed bento lunches of pickles and rice balls and searched for bamboo canes to make wind chimes, vases, and toys. Autumn brought children running barefoot in the soft heat of fallen husks, playing their games of tag and hide-and-go-seek, lingering late into the rooster hour. But no one came to the grove in winter. I came alone through darkness—thick with cold and sorrow.

Dawn’s gray lines ribbed the black winter sky. With each step forward my head pounded and ached. And then it was before me—the bamboo grove, bowed low with snow—a white mound, smooth and round, like the burial grounds of old. Snow covered the burrowing entrances made by the villagers. Bamboo branches bent to the ground beneath relentless waves of white. I circled the edge, then I tracked a way in. When I sensed an opening I reached in—the branches parted like the rectangular sections of cloth that hung in front of every shop door. Clumps of snow slid to the ground. Bending low I entered, standing beneath the curving reach of bamboo branches, beneath a leaf-latticed arc of ice and snow.

Patience serves the gods. So I stilled my breath and focused my mind, feeling into the ground below. Energy swelled into the arches of my feet and I knew what to do. I peeled off my gloves, tucked them beneath my outer robe, and reached into the frigid air. I felt a stiff, cool, sticky-smooth cane of bamboo. I

gripped firmly. Wind vibrated down the length of the stalk. For a moment the column pulsed in the notch between my thumb and forefinger, then the warmth faded. This was not the one.

Eyes closed, I eased my way through the grove, feeling my way forward, cane to cane, reaching, grasping, releasing, reaching, grasping, releasing, until I knew no time and no direction. Deeper and deeper I moved, turning sideways between canes, sliding around thick clumps, reaching with bare hands into the cold air for something I could not name. Until a shaft pressed into my palm and the wind rustle swelled into song that radiated through the air and expanded through my body. I felt a glow spread up my arm from the notch between my thumb and forefinger, and for the first time since I had woken, the ache in my heart eased. I had found what the gods sent me to find. Kneeling in the frozen crinkle of long, brown leaves beside the quivering cane, I opened my pouch. I took out a handful of unpolished rice. Pouring the rice into a mound beside the column, I honored the spirit of the bamboo. I recited prayers of gratitude until the spirit of the bamboo became a bright light and I knew that the bamboo offered itself fully.

After the blessing came the work. I pulled the tools from my pack. I tugged on my gloves, warm from the heat of my body, and raised the shovel. Setting the sharp end to the ground I stepped down hard. My breath billowed in white clouds as I dug. When the hole grew large enough I took the curved pick and carved out chunks of crystal dirt, revealing the root of the bamboo. Then I set the sharp teeth of a small saw blade to the smooth skin. I worked the blade with short thrusts. The bamboo shivered. Shuddered. Leaned onto my shoulder.

I eased the bamboo to the ground and I squatted on my haunches. I reached for a handful of herbs in my pocket and chewed slowly. As an apprentice, I had grimaced at the bitterness. Now I savored the tang across my tongue. I spat the brown wad into my left palm and spread the paste around the shorn root. Then I sat cross-legged on the ground, with the bamboo cane across my lap. I traced a span from the root up several notches with my hand, then rested both hands on the smooth surface and closed my eyes.

The vision arrived. Mournful notes swirled. Kenji stood in profile to me, arms raised, bamboo flute to his lips. The sound scattered blood-red maple leaves and for a moment he stood suspended in a scarlet whirl.

When I opened my eyes, my hands knew where to make the final sawing cut. I hefted the length of bamboo and felt where it tipped, where it rolled, where it balanced. When the time came, I would carve this bamboo into a bamboo flute, a *shakuhachi*, and the *shakuhachi* would find the boy.

* * *

The freshly harvested bamboo hung in my sleeping area. I sat facing the door. Waiting. I could hear Kenji stacking wood beneath the kitchen window. Kanemura, our village head, entered the hut in the early afternoon. The pain-hollowed ache of his glance preceded him. Before he bowed his head to the floor of the *tatami* mat I saw the worst written in the lines of his face, the downward cast of his eye. He pressed his forehead to the mat and remained there. Wood shifted in the pile. Sighs rose from the heart of the bamboo.

Kenji's grandparents would never return, nor would his mother come to find him.

Reports came in on the radio, although we did not learn the full extent of the damage for days. The first scattered reports described how Nihonbashi, Asakusa, and Honjo had vanished into a vortex of wind and liquid flame. Stories spread of bodies tangled in the Sumida river, charred in the streets, stacked on the bridges. Kenji's face did not change, nor did he cry when I told him, as gently as I could, that his family was gone. Gray mist settled around him. And behind him I saw the shimmering outline of the Buddha.

War leaves so little to hold onto. It was custom for some physical remains, usually ashes, to be placed in the urns, but nothing came back from the city. We enshrined the spirits of his mother and his grandparents in the family grave in the village. I stood beside Kenji as prayers were chanted, but I did not feel him quiver. It was agreed that the boy would remain in my care as he grew to manhood.

After the ceremony we returned to the hut, and I knelt before the ancestor altar. I motioned Kenji to kneel beside me. Inside the hollow of the rectangular altar, beneath the candles, I placed thin memorial tablets. There were three new ones beside his father's—one each for his mother, his grandmother, his grandfather. I lit candles and I spoke the prayers out loud so Kenji would hear them, so the silence that engulfed him might not swallow him completely, so that the sounds might form a bridge for him if he ever chose to speak again.

I looked for any hope to counter the despair. Many nights I had sat and I pondered the fate of the line of healers in the village. No one ever sent their daughter as apprentice and I had accepted long ago that I might be the last healer to tend to the village in the old ways. I pondered as I listened to Kenji's breathing. Sometimes the gods work in opposites—what starts in joy breaks the heart and what wounds leads to love. Perhaps I had not seen Kenji's path that first day because it ended at my door. I allowed myself to hope that here, perhaps, was the student I had long anticipated.