

KUROSHIO

The Blood of Foxes



ARSENAL
PULP PRESS

Terry Watada

KUROSHIO

Copyright © 2007 by Terry Watada

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any form by any means – graphic, electronic or mechanical – without the prior written permission of the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may use brief excerpts in a review, or in the case of photocopying in Canada, a license from Access Copyright.

ARSENAL PULP PRESS

200 – 341 Water Street

Vancouver, BC

Canada V6B 1B8

arsenalpulp.com

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the British Columbia Arts Council for its publishing program, and the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program and the Government of British Columbia through the Book Publishing Tax Credit Program for its publishing activities.

Text and cover design by Shyla Seller

Editing by Brian Lam

Cover illustration by Helen Koyama

Author photograph by Tane Akamatsu

Printed and bound in Canada

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters to persons either living or deceased is purely coincidental.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication:

Watada, Terry

Kuroshio : the blood of foxes / Terry Watada.

ISBN 978-1-55152-233-3

I. Title.

PS8595.A79K87 2007 C813'.54 C2007-903935-9

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Japanese terms in dialogue are not italicized to indicate the character is speaking Japanese. Conversely, italicized English words in dialogue are "spoken" in English.

*Dedicated to the memory of
Dr. Wes Fujiwara and Jesse Nishihata,
two of our great storytellers who shared so many secrets with me.*

I. Monday, March 11, 1940

The woman sat in the well-worn office chair, daring not to fidget for fear of making it squeak. She kept her head bowed sullenly, obsessively rubbing one of the clear red buttons of her Sunday-best dress. Cut like a jewel, the glass ornament usually sparkled but not so in the inert fluorescence of the small, airtight room.

Yoshiko Miyamoto, normally a young-looking forty-one-year-old, appeared haggard as if she hadn't slept in many nights. Perhaps it was the light, but her face was tight and pale. The lines at the corners of the eyes were deeper, darker than usual, sharply defined. But her skin held its resiliency and her hair, pulled up in a tight bun, was as black as her teenage daughter's. Yoshiko was the picture of a once-delicate woman grown old without looking much older.

Behind the heavy oak desk across from her sat the *oyabun*, the gangland boss of the Powell Street area, leaning back in his own creaking chair staring at the ceiling fan as he contemplated each slow revolution. The diminutive Etsuji Morii wore an oversized three-piece suit. Yoshiko had heard that the head of the Black Dragon Society was cheap, unwilling to go to a tailor, and so bought off-the-rack even though no department store carried his exact size.

"Can you help me, Oyabun?" Yoshiko pleaded unexpectedly.

Morii raised his thin eyebrows and his hand to silence her. He crooked his index finger to scratch the nub of a moustache beneath his bent nose. A stalling tactic. His narrow, secretive eyes, tight mouth, and clenched

jaw bore the signs of decadence and decay – the collapsed cheeks, the broken nose, the eroded complexion predicted a fall to ruin.

Not knowing what to say, Yoshiko averted her gaze, surveying instead the Nippon Club office. The wooden file cabinets were stuffed to the brim with paper, threatening to collapse with the next passing freight train. The walls were a dull green, plain without moulding or baseboards, but freshly painted and adorned with a pinned-up *Hinomaru* – the proud Japanese flag in full red sunburst – championship judo ribbons and the treasured framed certificate, awarded just last year by the Kodokan Judo headquarters in Tokyo, proclaiming Etsuji Morii a third *dan* black belt during the tenth month of the thirteenth year of the Showa Era, 1939. It was a room that revealed only what everyone already knew of its occupant. Perhaps that was more than enough since it was also the only office in the building, the true testament to the *oyabun*'s stature within the Japanese sector of east Vancouver, an area simply called "Powell Street" after its main drag.

Yoshiko's eyes settled on a grainy photograph of a fog-bound bridge, its obscured identity revealed in the unmistakable spider's web of girders and suspension wires. The fabled Golden Gate.

Biting her lower lip, she stared at the picture and ached to be in San Francisco even though she had never been to that saltwater city. Her face flushed hot with the thought of him laughing in the embrace of another woman. She grew angry in her vulnerability, wanting to lash out but daring not to in her pocket of futility. Instead, she sat wringing her hands so hard they turned a bloodless white.

"Miyamoto-san," Morii finally said, "you come to me with this ... this horror story and all you want me to do is bring him back?"

"I don't know what else to do!" Yoshiko burst out loud. She instantly withdrew, knowing she had violated the unwritten rule against the display of emotion. She sought escape in a damp handkerchief taken from inside her sleeve.

"Naniyo? Stop crying!" Morii admonished, suddenly angry. "I won't have blubbing women here!" His wide, tight mouth grimaced as his small fists slammed his desktop.

Yoshiko raised her eyes to come face to face with the devil. She trembled at the fury roiling in Morii and held her breath.

"Can you help me?" she pleaded in a whisper. It was clear Yoshiko was desperate, grasping at any string of redemption. "No one must know, Oyabun, I couldn't bear the shame."

"Shame? What're you talking about, woman? If he comes back, shame'll be the least of it. There's a lot more at stake here than your bloody reputation," he jeered and then turned his back on her. "Shame!" he scoffed. "Do you have any idea what's happening in the world? You don't, do you? You can't see what damage your selfishness could cause. You just can't see how everything could be brought down." He looked at her again.

In a moment of helplessness, Yoshiko reached out and touched his suit sleeve.

"You've brought dishonour to our people," Morii admonished as he pulled away. "You've brought dishonour to me."

She lowered her head, choking back tears. "Forgive me, Oyabun. Forgive me."

He paused. "All right. All right, I'm going to help you. Just stop crying!"

Yoshiko took a deep breath to compose herself.

"Who knows about this?" he asked.

"Only me, I think. Probably others."

"Do others know or not?"

"No, no one."

"Are you sure? Friends? Relatives?"

"I had a cousin in Steveston but she's dead." She blurted out the lie easily. "Everyone I have is dead."

"Listen, you go home and I'll go see my Mountie friends."

Yoshiko visibly stiffened.

"Look, I said I'd help you," he said. "Not so much for you but for the sake of the Japanese here."

"But –"

"The police don't have to get involved with this. I'm going to keep this quiet," he said with resolve. "I do so much, you don't know. I work ... I sacrifice so much but boke-nasu Japanese like you live in your own little selfish worlds. Without any respect for all I do for you until you get in trouble!" he said, nearly boiling over with anger. "I'll call on you."

His words fell like a hard rain as Yoshiko gathered herself together and rose to leave. As she walked to the door, she forced a perfunctory smile that quickly disappeared when Morii bid his farewell.

"Well, we've set up an obligation here. Haven't we?" the *oyabun* said, almost under his breath.

Yoshiko shuddered and wondered how and if she would ever be free of such an obligation – of such *giri*.

The cold humidity of that cloudy March day enveloped her when she left the darkness of the hulking, anonymous building on Alexander Street. She pulled her faded cloth coat close to her and scurried to get away from the weather eastward up the rise of the street. As the cold chased her, she imagined the accusing stares of the Nodas, whose Yoshino Restaurant occupied the first floor of the Empress Rooms, a boarding house a couple of store fronts away from the Nippon Club. *They're such gossips*, she thought to herself. Not that Kikuno and Yoneko Noda knew anything, but they viewed any visit to Morii with suspicion. Fortunately, the curtains in the restaurant's large picture window were drawn.

Yoshiko knew that going to Morii was a desperate measure, a last resort, but the situation warranted it. She ached for the return of the way things were: afternoons with him in his room, the sun slicing through the darkness, caressing their bodies.

His hands were soft, not like those of a woman but of a man of grace and civility. They ran over her skin like warm water, streaming into the crevices of her body. A shiver of pleasure.

A life so different from what she had when she first came to Canada. The cost was heavy, but she was only too willing to pay it, perhaps because the consequences, as in most cases, were only now becoming apparent. Still, it could've been worse: she wasn't wracked with guilt, keeping as she did the horrible thoughts about what she had done at bay like a dam against a swollen river. She sneered at the *oyabun's* disgust; she knew full well what was at stake for her. Little did she care about the world.

She crossed Dunlevy Avenue and soon the Japanese Hall came into full view. The squat, grey cement-block building, simple in its architecture and empty at that moment, was where most of the Japanese locals took their children for after-school language lessons. It was adjacent to the original school, a wooden structure whose classrooms were reserved for the junior grades. She had considered taking her own daughter, Mariko, there, but decided the child had had enough trouble in English school to justify risking further embarrassment. She jerked her head away, catching sight of Burrard Inlet with distant seagulls rising above it, undulat-

ing like newspapers caught in the updrafts beneath the peaks of North Vancouver's mountains. The salt air felt good.

She walked to the corner of Alexander Street and Jackson Avenue and stopped in front of the Three Sisters Café, the place where everything had started six months before and perhaps where everything would end. Yoshiko squinted through the large front window obscured by partially open Venetian blinds and made out the long linoleum-topped counter with its four metal stools. Focusing on the second stool from the left, the one with the ripped vinyl, she hoped against hope to catch sight of him sitting there once again, but it was empty. Her heart sank – the memory of him in his cashmere coat lingered before fading away.

To the right of the counter, a set of stairs led to the rooms on the second floor where the real business of the establishment took place. All of a sudden Hatsuko Yamada, the eldest of the three sisters, emerged from the backroom kitchen and looked up, seeming to stare directly at her. Yoshiko, startled at being discovered, rushed away southward toward Powell Ground, a bleak clay field nestled in the heart of the Japanese section.

The park was empty, but opposite it on the north side of Powell Street, the line of stores, garishly painted in primary colours and covered with flat tarpaper roofs and clapboard siding, bustled with shoppers. Mrs. Sawada, a shrunken and nervous woman, came out of Union Fish with that night's dinner wrapped in newspaper under her arm. Kids swarmed in and out of the Star Dairy and Confectionery, the community's *mirikuya*. Haruo, a fat-faced ten-year-old, clutched his prize of penny candy as he carried away the bottle of milk he had been sent to buy. Burly Mrs. Fukushima stood in the doorway, laughing heartily at the children who wrestled one another for show. She held the pain in her stomach in check as she turned to reveal her full, round face.

For fear of being noticed again, Yoshiko quickly crossed Powell and pushed along Jackson Avenue, moving quickly by the United Church's stained-glass gaze, past the glum *Japanese Gym* next door, and finally arriving at her boarding house, a drab two-storey with gabled roof and exterior shiplap siding crouched directly across from Powell Ground. She opened the front door and walked into the comforting anonymity.

The hallway was dark. The telltale fumes from the basement furnace tickled her nose and triggered her memory, pulling images into sharp relief. She began to shake and then cry, the dust in the air reaching out

to grab her throat. She tried shaking it off but the acrid smell of camphor conspired against her. Spinning around, she began choking and coughing until the tide of illness subsided.

Recovered, she removed her shoes and groped for the light switch in the front sitting room. With no boarders, the house was quiet, the gloom closing in on her. The deep darkness of the corridor ran the length of the house, passing a dining room and leading to a sizable kitchen. The back extension of the house consisted of two small bedrooms, reserved for the unusual but telling sleeping arrangement of Yoshiko and her sixteen-year-old daughter Mariko in one and Jinsaburo, her husband, in the other. Upstairs were four roomier apartments: three she rented to the transients of the logging and fishing trades and one she optimistically kept vacant, ready for its lodger's return. She sank into the front-room chair heavy with the burden of recent events.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that the family altar in the corner, an indulgence purchased during her recent brush with prosperity, was open, the pictures of long-dead relatives displayed prominently within its rich mahogany confines. In front of it, there were two stacks of *mochi* rice cakes both crowned by a fresh Mandarin orange, the offerings resembling meditating Buddhas. Mindful of the recently departed, Yoshiko decided she should light an incense stick. It was then that she noticed her hand shaking involuntarily. Must be the cold, she dismissed.

"The Buddha is always near," preached the Reverend Eon Mitsubayashi the last time she had attended a church service. *Even for me, sensei?* she had wondered. She rose to go to the kitchen, the intention fixed in her mind for later.

The small four-element gas stove seemed inadequate to cook for four boarders plus her family, Yoshiko remembered thinking when she had first moved in, but she had fed work crews of ten or more on a crude wood stove or open fire during her nomadic years in the lumber camps and mining towns of the Interior. She put the kettle on to boil.

She eased into her favourite kitchen chair, threadbare and rickety, and contemplated the silence of the house with a cup of tea. Her ears rang as she undid the knot in her hair, letting it fall loosely. She warmed at the thought of his fingers becoming enmeshed in it, like a swimmer in seaweed.

The ringing seemed to grow louder as she picked up her cup and teapot, the newly-bought green set with gold trim so much like her

mother's wedding gift all those years ago, and returned to the front sitting room. Her mind cleared after a few cups of jasmine tea. The sitting room had an open ceiling, the rafters exposed. Yoshiko stared at them, mesmerized by another vision of her own making.

She shook her head and moved to the altar. Three tall incense sticks stood in the pulverized ash of the kanagoro, a small, circular brass container. She swept her loose hair away as she struck a match to light all three sticks at once. The smoke quickly rose and accumulated in the empty space above her head. Startled at the amount, she turned away from the altar, the butsudān.

The air grew thicker until the light of the overcast day faded from the front window. From the billowing clouds, an image emerged, slowly yet insistently: the body of a girl, her eyes white, the pupils sunk into the recesses of the sockets, hung from one of the rafters. Her hair wet and straggly. Her dress a simple chemise, faded green, torn and ragged. Her hands limp and bruised by her sides – the crude rope digging into the tender flesh of the neck.

The sound of distant howling filled her ears.

Overwhelmed, Yoshiko opened her mouth to scream but could utter nothing. She collapsed to the floor with camphor and incense clogging her lungs. The presence of the Buddha.

The image lingered, the animal cries persisted, until she blinked and both vanished along with the smoke. She suddenly felt the cup hot on her fingertips and quickly put it down onto the coffee table. She chuckled. *My mind is playing games with me*, she thought, nearly saying it out loud. The vision was not unfamiliar to her because she had seen the mysterious child many times before. In her dreams, recent and past.



August 1917

The chanting floated atop the smoke from incense sticks burning before the grave markers of a humble yet overcrowded cemetery lying in the mountainous area on the Sea of Japan side of the country. Unseen crows called from above as the droning voices, modulating only a half-tone here and there, had a hypnotic rhythm, causing Yoshiko Hayashi to drift

into a daydream. The attending *bonsan* with closed eyes was lost in the Sanskrit of the Buddha Dharma, the Teachings of the Buddha. The clear ring of the ceremonial bell vibrated out in concentric circles, like the wake of a frog-spirit after plopping into water.

Standing nearby in the wilting summer heat were the relatives whose common ancestry lay before them, marked by wooden staves with the ideograms of the Hayashi clan inscribed.

The eighteen-year-old Yoshiko Hayashi paid no attention to the commemoration. It held little significance for her, just another ritual in a ritual-rich season. Her quarter-moon eyes ran up the rising mountain-side where the trees leaned acutely toward the distant, hidden peak, the smoke drifting amongst the branches like ghosts observing from a distance and buoyed by the soft, indistinct cries of the wilderness.

She enjoyed *Obon*, the Buddhist commemoration of the dead, the *odori* folk dancing, socializing and the lantern boat ceremony called the *toronagashi*, but the graveside visitations bored her to tears. Anyone could see it on her face, the liquid downcast eyes and the clear skin tight with inertia. Still, she stood with hands respectfully folded in front of her demure *kasuri kimono*, a confining cotton garment with a pattern of stars cascading across it; the fall of her hair came to a sharp point about halfway down the back without a strand out of place.

When the *bonsan* began his discourse about her grandmother, who had died the year before, Yoshiko forced herself to listen, if only as a matter of courtesy – it was an important anniversary, after all.

Obachan, Yoshiko's grandmother, was a woman with eroded skin, thin hair, and world-weary eyes, and had never travelled anywhere. Born not more than a mile from the cemetery, she had grown up to marry one of a hundred rice farmers in the village of Kiyama, so named for the "mountains of trees" surrounding it. After the Emperor Meiji abandoned Japan's feudal system, the modern-thinking couple eventually bought their own farm and cultivated rice. They raised eight children, all of whom married other villagers and raised their own children in turn. Obachan, after burying her husband in his sixty-ninth year, grew old on the farm and never left the village, not even to visit Tokyo. She herself died at the beginning of August in the fourth year of Taisho, 1916.

Yoshiko's parents were more adventurous. Although both were from a rural setting, her mother's village was by the sea, thus leaving the family home for stretches at a time to harvest fish or to go to market was not

altogether unfamiliar. Still, her parents were surprised when Yoshiko approached them last month with an outlandish proposal.

"I've never heard of such a thing!" Naka Hayashi declared to her husband, setting down her rice bowl and *hashi* chopsticks.

Jinshiro's knuckles turned white as he squeezed his hands tightly.

"Okasan, I've made up my mind," Yoshiko said obstinately. "I don't want to end up like Obachan!"

"Quiet!" said Jinshiro, her father, his face growing red with anger. "Such disrespect! Your grandmother's not dead a year yet."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Naka. Ignoring her husband's admonishments, she watched her daughter with great concern washing over her face, a slight bend in her back, presaging a widow's curve, becoming more pronounced as the discussion continued.

"She never went anywhere. I want adventure. I want more than Obachan ever had."

"So being a rice farmer isn't good enough for you?" Jinshiro abruptly stood up from the table and slid open the rice paper door, nearly knocking it off its track. He glared back at the tableau of his wife and daughter kneeling glumly before the simple meal of steamed vegetables, yam noodles, and pot of rice. He snorted his dismay and stepped into his *geta* to walk outside, the clip-clop of his wooden sandals penetrating the tranquility of his garden with its lush vegetation and chortling water.

"I want to go to *A-me-ri-ka*," she declared, enunciating the foreign word carefully. Although somewhat shamed by her father's words, she felt the courage of her conviction. "It's time for me to marry, Okasan. Please find me a husband who'll take me there."

Yoshiko loved her family but knew that the years ahead offered, at best, marriage to a farmer, an eldest son, without vision or ambition to see the world. A tyrannical mother-in-law lurked in the mist as well as if seeking to imprison her. And as the wife of the eldest son, she was destined to take care of her in-laws in their dotage. She winced at the years of drudgery to come, at the callous whim of tyrants.

Naka Hayashi had said no to her daughter right away and continued to say so throughout the evening until they sat together on the *tatami* straw mats of the sitting room that looked out onto the house's small enclosed garden. She recognized the yearning to travel in her daughter, since she had felt it once herself, to no avail. She had been the good daughter, after all, who implicitly obeyed her father's commands. Mindful of changing

times, however, she resorted to reasoning with her daughter. A trickling waterfall underscored the singing of the cicadas.

In a gentle tone, Naka spoke, "Yoshiko-chan, I need you here. Your two sisters are gone far away and now you want to go even farther. I'll be all alone."

"You have Otosan."

"But I have no help."

"Michiko-chan and Harumi-chan are nearby," Yoshiko said, referring to her brothers' wives.

"They have their own families to take care of."

Yoshiko scoffed at her mother's trepidation. *As if two able-bodied daughters-in-law couldn't "help" her*, she thought. *She just wants me to stay at home to torment me.*

"If you wait," Naka said, with a note of desperation, "your otosan and I can arrange for you to marry well. How about the eldest Watanabe boy? You'll live a very comfortable life."

Yoshiko's face turned sour immediately. "I will not be under the thumb of some awful mother-in-law, especially someone like old lady Watanabe! She's so mean, she'd work me to death saying no thanks whatsoever."

"I will not have you talking like that!" Naka chastised. "That is your duty, you *urusai* child!"

Yoshiko bowed in shame. Twice now she had forgotten herself before her parents. Has there ever been such a disagreeable child? she wondered.

In the advantageous pause, Naka posed, "*America?* There's nothing there but devil men and ghost women."

"That's just a child's tale," Yoshiko answered with a smile. "Okasan, remember how I felt on the pier in Yokohama two years ago? Remember? I told you."

Yokohama Harbour bustled with the commerce of Pacific trade. Ships bound for Kowloon, Singapore, and San Francisco groaned with their cargo. They were ready to set sail. Yoshiko stood on the pier, her sixteen-year-old eyes fancifully scanning the horizon for any glimpse of America. The whitecaps danced for her in the distance – the surface movement of the current below. She raised her arms toward the Pacific, stretching out as if to catch the watery swirl. The Kuroshio – the Black Current – lapped at the fingertips, pulling away pieces of her, dissolving her like an iceberg in tropical waters. The

hands disappeared. The arms melted and the hair wavered like seaweed. Her thoughts drifted into the outflow of water, sea, and air. She rode the Kuroshio, like Urashima Taro on the back of a benevolent sea turtle, travelling along the submerged trail within the Pacific Basin to the other side of the world.

"I must go to *America*," Yoshiko insisted. In the silence that followed, she noticed her mother's face harden. The cicadas' singing rose and ended in a screaming crescendo.

That had been a month ago. She had felt badly immediately afterwards, but that soon dissipated and she was proud of standing up for herself. Okasan has got to learn, she reasoned, that times have changed. The Emperor had said so.

Despite the fact that a silent chill, pierced by occasional bouts of argument, now prevailed between Yoshiko and her parents, she smirked at her own audacity as she stood in the darkness and random light of the *toronagashi* ritual by the river.

The silhouettes of men light the candles inside the paper lanterns affixed to foot-long wooden slats. The bonsan begins chanting while girls in kimono and short jackets called haori launch the flotilla into the river. After hesitating a moment, the crude boats, once caught by the unseen current, float toward the sea.

It is the end of Obon, the festival of the dead. The lanterns flicker as the spirits of ancestors flutter around the flames like moths. Slowly the black water infuses the thin paper walls until they can hold no more, and the beacons cave in, extinguishing the flame and releasing a puff of smoke. Ghosts rising to the Pure Land. Goodbye, goodbye until next year.

Yoshiko, having changed into her broad-brimmed hat, dark green chemise, tight cummerbund, and black skirt, stood among the shoreline bamboo trees, mesmerized by the candle lights on the indistinct river. She had discarded the constrictive *kasuri kimono* for the evening ceremony because it was time to think and dress Western, like the Emperor Meiji had advised when she was a child. "Only a fool fights change," the Emperor had said. *Some fools fight change.*

"Yoshiko-chan," asked a youthful voice, "are you awake?"

She jerked to attention. "Of course I'm awake! What a silly question."

She dismissed her sixteen-year-old cousin with a flash of disdain.

“Well, you looked so lost.” Akiko giggled, her round chubby face growing more animated with her teasing. “Thinking about some boy?”

“As a matter of fact I was,” Yoshiko said smugly.

“Really? Who? Who?” Akiko spoke rapidly as her body shook with sudden excitement.

“Why should I tell you?”

“Because ... because ...”

“Stop hopping like a frog!”

“And you stop teasing me!” Akiko pouted as she rearranged her cherry blossom kimono.

“Oh, stop. I don’t know who the boy is. I asked my parents to arrange a marriage for me!”

“Yoshiko! That’s wonderful! I bet they call on the Watanabe family. They’re so wealthy and have three sons.”

“Well, I don’t think –”

“And they’re all so handsome. Maybe I can ask my otosan to arrange a marriage for me too. We’ll be sisters-in-law!”

“Stop it, Akiko! I’m not going to marry one of the Watanabe boys. They all have weak eyes and big noses.”

“They do not.”

“Well, their thick glasses don’t fit very well on their faces.”

Akiko broke into an exaggerated laughter.

“It’s not final yet, but I asked my parents to find me a husband to take me to *America*.”

Akiko’s laughter sputtered into choking surprise.

Yoshiko sat with her legs folded underneath her in the sitting room again, watching the darkness settle as the evening wore on toward midnight. In the small room with a low-lying dressing table and ornate mirror mounted on top, her only company was the strong yet fragrant aroma of summertime mothballs that hung in the air.

She closed her eyes, listening to the mice clattering across the ceiling and oblivious to her presence. The tightness of her pleated hobble skirt made sitting difficult as she waited patiently for her *okasan* to come into the room with bad news. She thought of lighting the candle on the floor beside her but then she heard the telltale soft padding of her mother’s *tabi* stockings approaching.

“It’s so dark in here,” complained her mother. “Yoshiko, why don’t you...” Her voice trailed off as she fussed about the room lighting lamps with conveniently placed matches. Despite a sigh of exasperation, Yoshiko remained still and waited for her *okasan* to finish. As the gentle glow of the lamp played over the sombre rice paper walls in waves of chiaroscuro, she noticed her mother’s hunched posture, a physical feature which always made her feel inexplicably guilty. But it was her mother’s permanently pained expression that made it difficult for Yoshiko to confront her.

“How was the toronagashi? Everyone there?” Naka asked.

“I saw Akiko.”

“Ah,” she sighed. “Still as flighty as ever?”

“Okasan, she’s nothing like that!” Yoshiko insisted.

“The men get the boats off?” Naka asked, changing the subject.

“Very pretty ... the lights on the water. It reminded me of ...”

“Did you see Obachan’s boat?” Naka interjected.

“... sad departures.”

“Did you see the boat?” Naka repeated. “I paid good money for that.”

“Oh, why didn’t you just go down to the river bank and look for yourself!” Yoshiko asserted, startling herself and her mother. Though her mother wasn’t generally cheap, Yoshiko hated when this side of her emerged.

To avoid embarrassment, Naka quietly settled herself. Her impoverished childhood produced in her a need to save money, but her spoiled, brash daughter wouldn’t know anything about that. Again, she changed the subject.

“Your otosan and I have been talking.”

The pause was deafening.

“We really are against you travelling so far away and to such a dangerous foreign country.”

“But ...”

“But we’ve decided it’s your life,” Naka continued. “After a month of your nagging, we can see no amount of arguing is going to change your mind. You’re such a stubborn, *urusai* child!”

“So you’ll find me a husband who’ll take me?” Yoshiko asked anxiously.

“Your otosan will contact my family friend, Miyamoto Iwakichi, in

Mihama. He has a son overseas. We're going to need a good picture of you."

After this, Yoshiko didn't hear much more of what her mother was saying.

Landscapes loom before Yoshiko. Lush evergreen trees, reaching for the sun, spread branches in a welcoming embrace. The sweet smell of cedar fills her senses and her mind reels with the intoxication. Distant mountains seem to move to lend their strength to her. Her pores open. Her mouth opens. From deep within her spews a current of water, strong and abundant, pouring her essence onto the land in a ritual blessing of her new home. The Kuroshio has delivered her safely.

The shadows were intensely dark in the field between the neighbours' farms, even with the moonlight lapping the thatched roofs like waves on the beach. Yoshiko had promised to meet Akiko late, but she soon had second thoughts as the two stood on the dirt road looking across the swampy rice paddy to the smudge of mountains on the horizon. She was the *onesan*, or big sister, in Akiko's life. That carried a lot of responsibility, but now was the time to cut free. A faint harmony of animal calls chilled her in the strangeness of the night.

"Shimatta ne!" Akiko cursed, breaking the mood.

Yoshiko quickly scolded her. "Don't talk like that!"

"But there's mosquitoes out here!" she whined as she tried to slap them away.

The shrillness of her cousin's voice was something Yoshiko would not miss. She was so immature. "Stop being a baby," she insisted. "I've something important to tell you."

"Is it about your husband and *America*?"

"Shi! Be quiet," she commanded. "If I tell you, will you promise not to tell anyone?"

The young girl beamed, her pouting mouth professing loyalty while her body pressed forward, anxious for the news.

"All right then. My parents are arranging a marriage to Miyamoto Jinsaburo."

"Who's that?" Akiko exclaimed.

"Shi! I told you to be quiet! You want to wake everyone up?" The half moon had just about set, its meagre light now gently bathing the distant mountain peaks.

Akiko looked shamefaced.

"I don't know him either but he lives in Ban-ku-ba. Ka-na-da," she said, carefully pronouncing the strange new words. "*America!* Owns a big boarding house ... rich...." She spoke in fragments, as if trying to convince herself as much as her cousin.

"What's a boarding house?"

"I don't know exactly but my oka says it's like an inn, like Shimano-san owns," Yoshiko said. "I'm meeting his family –"

"Oh, why do you want to go so far away?" Akiko said, her eyes starting to well up. "From me ... from me?"

"Quiet! Be quiet, you little girl," Yoshiko said to comfort her. She reached out to her cousin and touched her shoulder a moment before drawing her hand away. "Don't be silly ... don't be silly...." Tears came to her own eyes as she sensed she had betrayed her cousin somehow. Was there ever going to be a time when they were together again?

"I'm not going yet," Yoshiko assured. "You can help me get ready. Come over tomorrow and help me pick out a photograph."

"What for?" Akiko managed to get out.

"To send to *Canada*."

Akiko smiled and nodded.

The road to her mother's birthplace was crude and dusty. Mihama was about five miles away, along the flat lands, far from the mountains of Yoshiko's own village. From the road, she saw acre after acre of rice paddies, their intense green surface of long slender shoots fluttering in the hot breeze. Adjacent to the fields, crisscrossed bamboo structures towered over everything, like skeletal giants teetering in the wind with their coats of drying rice harvest.

So elated was she about the prospects of the day that from time to time as she walked with her father, she called out to neighbours and strangers alike working in the fields. Some looked up, flashing a grin of recognition from beneath their broad, cone-shaped *mino-gasa* hats as they waved at her. Yoshiko felt special, as if she were royalty greeting her people. The prospect of being mistress of an inn made her beam uncontrollably. But her father said nothing to the well-wishers.

Jinshiro Hayashi was a stoic man who resembled his mother, Yoshiko's *obachan*, having inherited her sad, stony demeanor. In Yoshiko's mind, her father's weary eyes and creased face were the scars of a life full of constant worry and endless work. Jinshiro, as the first-born son, had taken up

the challenge of saving the nearly bankrupt family farm after his father's stroke. Even though he toiled long, back-breaking hours in the fields just to make ends meet, he never complained.

Nor did he put on airs when times grew better. Instead, with the help of his two sons, he quietly refurbished the old farmhouse with fresh *tatami* mats. He fixed the roof, enlarged the cooking area, and managed to install an enclosed garden with a small fountain and lush vegetation as an oasis in the constant struggle to keep ahead of the creditors.

Yoshiko only hoped that she was not fated to bear such scars.

Jinshiro's relationship with his children was at best distant, but at times he was capable of kindness and poetic understanding. One such incident occurred five years earlier, when Yoshiko was thirteen.

In the middle of the summer of 1912, she had come home from the village store in tears. The sun was high and the sea playful, both out of step with her feelings. The first person she saw was her *otosan*, and she ran to him.

"Yoshiko-chan, what's wrong?"

"The Emperor ... the Emperor," she said, subsiding to a whisper, "is dead."

"Who told you that?"

"Shimizu-san, the postman," she said, stifling a snuffle. "Is it true, Ootosan?"

"Yes, it is," Jinshiro confirmed as his stern face melted at the sight of his distraught daughter. He put his arms around her and held her tightly. The beloved Emperor Meiji, the ruler who had brought the modern world to Japan, had died in the night, leaving a nation in mourning.

Although unaccustomed to such a show of affection, Yoshiko appreciated the warmth of her father's embrace.

"The time of Meiji is now gone, Yoshiko-chan," he said, "but maybe you can keep its spirit in your heart." His voice softened as he spoke. "Today is the first of August, the month of Obon –when the dead come back to comfort us."

As they walked buoyantly toward Mihama, the daughter properly behind the father, Yoshiko and her *otosan* said very little. Japan was at war but there was little negative effect on the people, rice farmers especially. Everyone knew the country was becoming a world power as part of the

Allied Forces, and the people swelled with pride that their military had ousted the Germans in the Marshalls, the Marianas, and the Carolines in the Pacific, not that Yoshiko or her contemporaries knew of their significance or even where these places were situated. But many salivated over Japan's foothold on China's Shantung Peninsula, the beginning of extensive machinations in that country.

In silence, Yoshiko admired her *otosan's* formal black kimono, brown felt fedora, and travelling slippers. The family crest of a white fan enclosed in a circle was positioned in five spots on his outfit: each side of the chest, on each sleeve, and in the middle of the back just below the collar line. The material was the traditional *habutae*, a glossy, lightweight silk cool enough for a hot summer's day. He looked so different from his usual work shirt, leggings, and *hakama* workpants, the garb of a rice farmer. No, today was a special day, and everyone knew it by the way he was dressed.

Yoshiko too was clothed in an informal kimono that her *okasan* had sewn, a pattern of red maple leaves tumbling over the garment as if caught in the wind. The material a light and therefore cool blue cotton, the kimono was worn loosely –ideal for a long walk in the stifling, sticky weather.

With the smell of the sea in the air, Mihama soon came into view. The fishing village, appropriately named the "Three Beaches," was built from the delta of the Tsuruga River at the Sea of Japan, spreading out along both banks of the river's curve. The land was generally flat, running to forests so green the vegetation hurt the eyes in the naked sunlight.

Yoshiko and her family had been there a few times in her lifetime to visit her mother's relatives. The Shinodas lived close to the beach in a modest house, typically decorated with a chaotic nest of fishing nets. Large globes of green glass floats accentuated the mass of webbing. In all likelihood, the family was out to sea and her father told Yoshiko that they would not be visiting. A distraction she didn't want anyway, though she did wonder, for a moment, what her mother was like when she was her age.

Mihama's houses were similar to those in Kiyama, simple square wooden structures with thatched roofs seemingly cobbled together, all identical except for the Miyamoto estate which stood on the only promontory above the Tsuruga River. Iwakichi Miyamoto had built himself up from modest beginnings to become the region's largest landholder, rice purveyor, and lumberman. Proof of his success resided in his grand

house of crimson brick foundation and cedar panels overlooking the village from the highest vantage point in Mihama.

Yoshiko felt the thrill of her expectations as she approached her new life.

“Hello! Hello!” called an old man, his legs bare and curved by rickets. He smiled broadly as he rushed forward to greet them. “You must be very tired. It’s such a hot day.”

Yoshiko smiled back, thinking what a funny-looking servant this was.

Iwakichi nodded his head to her father, who bowed in return. “Hayashi-san, so nice to see you again,” he said. “It’s been too long. How is your wife and family?”

“Very well, Miyamoto-san,” Jinshiro replied. “This is my daughter Hayashi Yoshiko.”

Yoshiko wiped the smile off her face, realizing this was her future father-in-law. This is not a good start, she thought. She bowed deeply as if apologizing.

“You are a pretty one,” Iwakichi said.

Yoshiko blushed, but smiled secretly, thinking she had gotten away with something.

“Well, come on then, let’s go inside, out of the sun,” Iwakichi continued, showing them in. As Yoshiko entered the house, she couldn’t help but gaze in awe at what she saw. She nodded her approval as the gleaming oak floors and faintly golden *tatami* mats took her breath away; it was the brilliant electric lights, however, that made her gasp in amazement.

“I like to have the lights on all the time,” Iwakichi said. “But that generator is so damned loud!”

Yoshiko began to relax, giggling quietly at her future father-in-law’s irritation at the buzz of the generator outside that could be heard everywhere.

“So you want to marry my son.” Iwakichi’s voice was full of gravity, but he smiled gently. His face, a study of scars and leathery skin, bore the years of hard work without regret.

“Do you have a picture?” she said abruptly, startling even herself.

“Naniyo Yoshiko? Don’t be so rude,” Jinshiro scolded. “You’re not buying a cow!”

“It’s all right. It’s all right,” chuckled Iwakichi, waving Jinshiro’s objections off. “I expected this. The girl’s got a right to know what her husband looks like.” He reached within his kimono and pulled out a pho-

tograph. “I’m afraid this is the most recent one I have. He was younger then.”

With a heightened sense of anticipation, Yoshiko gingerly accepted it and examined the image of a dour boy in his dark, militaristic school uniform staring back. The small face in the black and white photograph was grainy but the uncertain, tentative look of adolescence was clear. With a pockmarked complexion, squinting eyes, and thin-lipped mouth, his youth swam just beneath the surface. At first she was disappointed at such a distorted and out-of-date picture, but she imagined a handsome face emerging with the onset of adulthood.

“Here’s one for your son,” Jinshiro offered, magically producing his own photograph.

Yoshiko gasped. “Otosan! Not that one!”

The sepia-toned picture depicted a trio of two brothers and Yoshiko posed in rather formal, subdued kimonos, with joyless, sullen expressions on their faces.

“Yoshiko-chan!” her father admonished. “It’s good enough.”

“But Akiko and I picked one out,” she whined as she pulled out her own, a photo of a young woman demurely dressed in a lightly coloured kimono and holding a bamboo parasol, looking expectantly into the distance.

Jinshiro shook his head in dismay.

“Please, Miyamoto-san, send my photograph to your son,” Yoshiko asked earnestly.

Iwakichi laughed heartily, suggesting to his future daughter-in-law the message that she had won the day.

“I’m so sorry,” Jinshiro said. “My daughter asks for the world.”

“No, no. She’s a good match for my son. Jinsaburo always writes home about his large boarding house in *Canada*. He’s become a good business man.” Iwakichi spoke like a proud father as he called for tea and sake from one of the hovering servants, a pretty young woman who offered a tiny smile to Yoshiko. “He’ll need a partner who knows her own mind!”

“Why did he leave . . .?” Yoshiko ventured.

“Damare! That’s enough,” Jinshiro scolded, even though he knew it was a fair question. Why would the sole heir to an obvious fortune leave for an uncertain future in such a faraway land?

But Iwakichi let the question hang in the air, and the two men then

carried on as Yoshiko silently sipped her tea. A dowry was offered and the deal sealed. Iwakichi said he would register Yoshiko's name with the family temple and then get in touch with his son to make arrangements to sponsor his bride overseas.

That night, the late August moon hung full and high like a jewel, suspended in the window frame of her guest room somewhere deep in the Miyamoto compound. Lying on her back, Yoshiko's mind raced with all kinds of thoughts: travel overseas, the wedding celebration, Akiko. She and her younger cousin had always fantasized about their ideal husbands, but that was schoolgirl talk. Yoshiko had never told her of her dread of a traditional marriage. She knew Akiko would be content to marry some farmer and fulfill all the expectations of a Japanese bride and never, ever understand Yoshiko's motives.

No, the man I marry will be adventurous and have the strength of ten men. His eyes will be clear and black like coal. His hair too, long and dark like fertile earth. He'll stand tall, proud of his accomplishments as seen in his straight back and great flexed muscles. He'll have lived in the land of white devils and ghost women and will be their master. And I will be his wife.

She rolled over and pulled out his photograph. Holding it close to her heart, she swooned in a young girl's reverie. *Do you see the moon, my love? We are together despite the miles of ocean between us.*

She pushed away the heavy *ofuton*. The evening was too hot to be covered. Loosening her *nemaki*, she struggled to stand up. The breezes felt cool on her skin. She closed her eyes as the moon expanded, enveloping her in its brilliant glow. Her garment fell away and the air currents tickled her full breasts before drifting across the pale-white expanse of her abdomen, then finally diving into the blackness between her legs.

She angled her pliant cheek to his clean-lined jaw and pressed her breasts against his chest. The flesh flattened and then moulded into the crevices like soft dough. Her hands traced the curves of his muscled upper arms. Her legs opened to him. She moaned weakly and squeezed her eyes.

On the floor by her feet, she noticed the pool of light had shifted. As she stepped back into it, her body glowed blue and the wind ran through

her hair like gentle fingers. She knelt down and offered herself with arms spread wide and palms open to the cold beauty of the moon and the subtle movement of night drafts.