

“Melancholic Things”

Volume 1: The Major Work

“The Things She Owned”

and

Volume 2: The Exegesis

“Objects as Markers for Identity Transformation in Fictional
Grief Narratives”

Thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English and Creative Writing

School of Humanities

Faculty of Arts

University of Adelaide

Submitted March 2016

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Abstract

“The Things She Owned” is a work of literary fiction in the genre of the grief narrative. The interwoven stories of Michiko and Erika, a mother and daughter, follow Michiko’s life from her wartime childhood in Tokyo to early adulthood, and Erika’s, after her mother’s death, in contemporary London.

Erika has not dealt with an urn containing some of Michiko’s bones, nor with other things once owned by her mother, all of which sit untouched and hidden in a dusty cabinet. The arrival of her Japanese cousin Kei forces Erika to confront the difficult feelings stirred up by the sight of these objects.

Each section of the narrative from Erika’s life is prefaced by an ekphrastic description of objects that once belonged to Michiko; the things appear within the body of the narrative, each playing a different role in reflecting Erika’s sense of identity in relation to the death of her mother. Some are relics, some represent fossilised grief; others are catalysts for Erika’s transforming identity.

A military academy ring found in a secret cabinet drawer prompts Erika to travel to Okinawa to find the man she discovers is her real father. There, she has an accident climbing to a waterfall and her rapidly changing internal world becomes apparent.

The exegetical component of this thesis examines the role played by objects in fictional grief narratives and how they illustrate identity reconstruction of a protagonist that has suffered traumatic loss. Acknowledging that traumatic loss shatters the world view of the bereaved, requiring a re-ordering and reconstruction of a new identity to help find new meaning in a forever-changed world, this exegesis seeks to fill a gap in research, exploring the way objects can be used as markers to reflect the different stages through which the bereaved progress through a process of identity reconstruction. The exegesis suggests a new schema for the analysis of objects and their changing roles in grief narratives by combining findings from the research of Margaret Gibson — into the way the bereaved relate to the

objects of the dead — with thing theory, bereavement theory and psychoanalytical research, particularly incorporating ideas on the transitional or cathexic object.

For the purposes of this thesis, Siri Hustvedt's novel, *What I Loved*, is read closely alongside "The Things She Owned" to demonstrate the application of the suggested schema. The exegesis will also examine how using the real in fiction — real objects, in the case of "The Things She Owned" — helped to mitigate difficult feelings that arose during the writing process. It also addresses a perceived yearning for authenticity, epitomized by a surge in the popularity of grief narratives, in an age of rapidly-consumed multimedia and shallow sensationalism.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Katherine Tamiko Arguile

Acknowledgements

The idea for “The Things She Owned” came to me in 2002, but it was only in 2010, when I took up my place at the University of Adelaide to undertake a PhD in Creative Writing, that the novel began to take form. The APA Scholarship I was awarded enabled the completion of this novel, which forms the creative component of my thesis. I cannot overstate the importance of this award, nor my gratitude for receiving it, given the current state of university funding as I write in 2016.

My thanks are due also to those in the Creative Writing department at the University of Adelaide who were part of my selection for PhD candidature. It has been a privilege to be amongst such illustrious writers, experienced academics and wise editors, and be given the support and encouragement so essential to emerging writers.

My gratitude and thanks go also to the Eleanor Dark Foundation, who awarded me a Varuna Retreat Fellowship in 2014, allowing me a fortnight of intensive and uninterrupted writing bliss in Varuna Writers’ House, surrounded by the beauty of the Blue Mountains. It is there that I completed the first draft of this manuscript.

Travel funding awarded to me by the University’s English department enabled me to travel to Okinawa, Cambridge and to London for essential research, and for this, I am deeply thankful.

An excerpt from this novel, the chapter entitled ‘Dai Nishō’, was published in slightly altered form in ‘Breaking Beauty’, an anthology of short stories edited by Lynette Washington and published by Midnight Sun Publishing. This publication provided me with early opportunities for exposure as a writer at the start of her career, for which I am deeply grateful.

Involved and fascinating discussions with Dr Shōko Yoneyama of the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Adelaide were formative to the writing of this manuscript. The ideas aired during these conversations — particularly those about Okinawan culture —

were what helped to give it life. I am most thankful to her for sharing her time, energy and knowledge with me.

My heartfelt thanks also go to Dr Carol Lefevre, a writer whose profoundly moving and beautiful work I greatly admire. She is one of the most generous editors and reviewers I have had the fortune to encounter. Her feedback was crucial to the structure and flow of “The Things She Owned”; without it, it would have been a far poorer work. I left each of our encounters richer in ideas, and always inspired.

To Dr Sue Hosking, my love and deepest gratitude. Throughout the years under her supervision, she has coaxed me through the tricky process of writing a first novel. It is her loving patience, rigour, objective support and encouragement that gave me the courage to complete it, and to make it the novel it has become. It has been a great honour to be supervised by her.

To the ‘Archetières’ — talented writers who read my manuscript and provided valuable feedback, thanks and love also: Rachael Mead, Anna Solding, Heather Taylor Johnson and Rebekah Clarkson. We have shared tribulations, joys and sorrows about our writing and our lives, making our friendships all the richer. To Lynette Washington, talented and enthusiastic writer and editor, who worked alongside me on her thesis on our ‘exegesis-writing days’, and for whom I have great admiration; my love and thanks. She provided me with unshakeable encouragement and inspired me with her extraordinary courage; thank you for your friendship.

To my 5th Grade homeroom teacher, Linda Dixon Howard — then Mrs Boyd — her enthusiastic support of my earliest forays into fiction writing had a greater impact than she can ever know, and for that I am deeply grateful. To Albyn Hall, who long ago gave me the advice that set me on the path to writing this manuscript, my heartfelt thanks also.

To Emma Anderson and Craig Harrison, who own the most perfect writing shack on the Yorke Peninsula, my thanks for sharing with me such a magical place and allowing me to

write, alone and interrupted, surrounded by the wild beauty of the coast. It was there that I was able to complete this thesis.

To Miles Dodd, my father, my love and thanks for his support, on so many levels, that has allowed me to pursue my calling as a writer. He instilled in me my love of reading, encouraging me to read from an early age and ensuring I was always surrounded by books. Without him, my calling as a writer may never have surfaced. To his partner too, Dr Jocelyn Probert, much love and thanks; for being the perfect reader, for giving helpful and objective feedback on this manuscript, and for encouragement and support. Our tastes in literature are so similar, it is a shame half a planet's time difference complicates further discussions on the books we love.

My late mother, Akiko Yonekubo Dodd, is someone whom I sorely miss, even twenty years after her death. She was kind, funny, lively, beautiful, and one of the best storytellers I have ever known. She instilled in me my love of storytelling, and she, too, often had her head buried in a book. I am most adamant that the character of Michiko in my creative work should not be confused with my mother's. The only commonality they have was of their wartime experiences, which I believe also affected my mother. Her death was untimely, a great loss to all who loved her, and her suffering a tragedy.

And to Paul Arguile, my husband, who patiently bore the ups and downs of living with a wife undertaking PhD candidacy *and* a first novel — thank you for the dinners cooked, the laundry washed, the coffees sold, for talking me through moments of doubt and uncertainty— for giving me the time, and for the love, encouragement and support you have given me. Thank you for having so much faith in me. All my love to you.

“Melancholic Things”

Volume 1: The Major Work

“The Things She Owned”

A Novel

For my mother, who was as far from Michiko as light is from dark.

Prologue

That day, the sun was blinding and bright. They went ashore; there was a picnic on white sand and her mother sat, beautiful, in a cream swimsuit showing off sun-darkened skin. Permed ebony curls tumbled out of a red and white polka-dot scarf tied around her head. When Erika closed her eyes the pulsing imprint of the sun radiated white and scarlet beneath her lids. When she opened them she saw her mother vibrant against blue sky, magnificent, like a goddess.

Back on the boat, Erika searched for signs of happiness in her mother's face, but sunglasses obscured her eyes. Erika needed to know things were safe. Sometimes she glimpsed the whites of Michiko's eyes through the dark lenses but they revealed nothing, so she stared at her mouth. Her mother's crimson lips opened wide to reveal white teeth each time she laughed. Her laughter echoed with emptiness. She sipped from a frosted cocktail glass full of clear, viscous liquid. At its edge glistened a grey-green olive pierced with a toothpick, a little red dot seductively peering from its bottom. Michiko held it against the glass rim with a scarlet-nailed finger as she drank. When the glass was empty she plucked the olive from its stick with her teeth and displayed it, her lips drawn back, before swallowing it with a sideways glance at the men around her. Julian or Peter or one of the other men hovering around would refill her glass from a bottle in the icebox. All afternoon Michiko drank, crossing and uncrossing her legs on the recliner cushions, nodding and laughing, not saying much except to murmur *Honto~? Really?*, cooing agreement with those chatting around her.

Erika wanted to reach out and touch the glass, to feel its frostiness the way her mother was feeling it, to gaze at the slow-moving streaks of clear liquid. She wanted to trace the outline of her mother's mouth with her fingertips. She moved close and touched her arm without looking at her; felt the warmth of the sun on her skin. Michiko swatted her hand

away. *Stop it darling, you annoying.* When she said *darling* her mouth stretched thin and wide, baring white teeth: *Dah-leeen*, with no *g* at the end.

Michiko laughed at something Julian said. *Oh, Julian, you so funny. Oh, Julian!* As the sun crossed overhead and made its way towards the horizon, Julian performed increasingly more wobbly handstands, bowing; mimed walking the plank, goggling his eyes at his lover, making her laugh. Marit laughed too, though less loudly, and now and then she glanced at Erika. Feeling Marit's gaze on her, Erika looked up in time to catch a strange expression that dissolved, quickly, into a smile. She was happy Marit was visiting. She loved Marit. She and Lars had come to stay with them in Hong Kong for a whole two weeks.

She moved to sit beside Michiko, kneeling on the deck beside the recliner, to try laying her head on her lap, so soft and inviting. Julian had lain there a moment ago, so surely she could, too. Her mother pushed at her. *Yada! Don't touch me, you sticky and sweaty. Go play over there!* She pointed with the hand that carried the glass, slopping icy liquid.

Erika curled into some cushions in the prow. She stared out at the sea's horizon, trying to figure out where the water ended and the sky began, and listened to the conversation behind her. She didn't like not being able to see her mother, so she turned so she could keep watching her. Some of the men partly obscured her view. Marit and Lars sat to one side, watching her too. Marit looked sad. Michiko proffered her glass again for a refill and one of the men, the blonde one, leaped forward with the bottle. He stared at her mother as he poured from the bottle into her glass and it soon overflowed, spilling into her lap. *Oh*, she cried, laughing, — *so cold!* and he took a wad of napkins from the tray behind him and began to mop the spill, touching her legs while she twitched under his fingers, giggling. Erika saw her cover the cloud of injection marks on her thighs with her palms, noticed Julian standing back with his arms crossed, staring, his face darkening. The blonde man sat close beside Michiko, draping his arm over her thigh. She smiled at him, laughing a little. He leaned into her, talking to her in a strange way with his face turned to the side so that his mouth was close to

her ear, his ear close to her lips, as if he wanted to be sure to catch every word. All grew quiet.

Erika was so intent on watching her mother with the man that when Julian loomed over her she jumped.

Hey! Kid! How about we go for a swim, hey? Would you like that?

She loved the sea. She loved her swim at the beach earlier. She liked that she could put her feet down on the sandy floor whenever she grew tired of splashing about. She wouldn't be able to, out here. But she swam the deep end of the pool at the club and it probably wouldn't be much different. It might be fun.

She brought her water wings to her mother. *Michiko?* She waited. The man was still curled around her, murmuring, and her mother gave no response. Erika waited.

Come on kid! What's taking so long? Julian sounded angry.

Mama~? Now she would get her mother's attention.

Michiko whipped round. *I hate you call me that! MICHIKO desho?*

Erika held up the floppy bits of orange plastic. Her mother frowned and tutted, gesturing for her to come closer. She slipped a wing onto each arm, and pursing her lips tight around the air valves, she blew, leaving crimson smears. The blonde man stayed where he was, quite still, watching her. Erika suddenly wanted to push him away from her mother, hard, both hands against his chest, but Michiko had her arms gripped so tight that her fingers left white imprints. She felt blood pulsing as the wings grew fatter. When her mother inserted a finger between the inflated water wing and her skin, running it around the edge, it caught at the fine flesh and hurt her, but Erika made no sound or movement.

Erika knew that her mother's eyes, hidden behind the sunglasses, were on her. Erika loved her so much at this moment; wanted to sit close and put her arms around her neck. To be where the blonde man was, closer, even, so she could crawl inside her. This was *her* place; he didn't belong there, not him, not Julian either. *She* was the one who belonged to Michiko.

She bathed in the imagined gaze of her mother's love, not moving. Then Michiko slapped her bottom with a playful laugh. *Go on then, have swim, Julian take care of you.*

Erika wanted to use the long ladder that stretched all the way down the side of the boat into the waves, but Julian picked her up before she got there, grabbing her under the arms from behind. He began to whirl her round.

Whee! Heeey!

It made her laugh. He'd whirled her around like that before and it was fun, though it made her feel a bit sick afterwards. It always made her giggle when he put her down and the room kept tilting and spinning even after she'd stopped going round in circles. She couldn't work out where the floor was and she'd fall over, laughing until her tummy hurt.

She saw flashes of sea, the sun, blue sky, her mother, the blonde man, Marit, Lars, the other man, the deck, the sail, the sea, the sun, blue sky, her mother, the blonde man, Marit, Lars, the other man, the deck, the sail... She was flying.

Yaaahhh! I'm gonna chuck you right in! Here we go! Whooshhh!

She felt Julian stumble and her heart skipped. He steadied himself. He began to swing her from side to side, inching closer to the edge of the boat. He was pretending he was going to throw her in. Her laughter turned to shrieks each time he swooped her up over the edge of the boat, when, for a moment, she would feel as if she were lifting right up and out of his arms and could see, far below her, the dark shining sea. Her tummy would fall out from inside her, making her scream and laugh. Each time, she'd fall back into his arms, and he would scoop her back towards the deck. Each time, she expected him to put her down so she could go to the ladder and climb down into the water for a swim. But he kept on and on, swinging and swinging. She began to feel sick. She wanted him to stop. She cried out. *No! I want to get down!*

He kept going, as if he couldn't hear her. She squirmed in his grip.

Stop! I don't like it! Louder. Please!

But he didn't stop. He kept swinging her backwards, forwards, over the edge of the boat, lurching, hooting. *Wahaaaayyy!! Woooohh!!*

Julian, put her down! That was Marit's voice.

He didn't stop.

Julian! Marit was shouting.

His fingers were gripped tight under her arms and were hurting her. She wriggled to loosen his grip, to relieve the pain and fear. She wanted to cry, but knew it would embarrass her mother, so she bit her lip, her breath catching in her throat. She whimpered. She struggled to break free of Julian's clutches. Still he wouldn't stop.

JULIAN!

It was on an upward swoop over the edge of the boat when Erika finally worked her way free. She felt the familiar lift out of his hands but this time, when she fell back she felt only the brush of his fingertips against her ribs and she was free, flying, her stomach leaping inside her. The lightness of the air she fell into was delicious. The rush in her ears, the white noise of the waves beneath her, was punctured only by Marit's long shout as she fell, headfirst, for what seemed forever.

PART 1

Dai Isshō

*

Michiko could not remember anything before she saw the blazing chrysanthemum in the sky. The colossal bloom of flames crowned the city, its petals of orange, red and gold unfurling and beating against the darkness. The dreadful brilliance of this all-consuming flower transformed night into day, and its smell, its roar, struck her so that all memories she might have retained before this day were obliterated.

She bounced against her mother's back as the family ran towards the Imperial Palace moat, towards safety. As they fled, houses collapsed with snapping, creaking groans, opening up new and previously unseen vistas along their street. Michiko peered over her mother's shoulder, then buried her face again, but it was too late to unsee what was now seared under her lids. Her heart drummed in her ears. Blinding incendiaries flashed through black sky, their shrieks punctuated by the juddering bass drone of the silver-winged B-29s that spawned them. A direct hit on a fire cart spewed forth searing globs, and the dull crump of the explosion travelled through the packed earth of the street, through her mother's body and into her own. The cart driver, his body alight, leaped off and tumbled on the ground. His horses screamed as they bolted into the fleeing crowd, the flaming cart still tethered to their burning backs. Hooves and wheels bumped over bodies. The neighbourhood fire buckets stood steaming, filled in readiness, unnoticed. Figures stumbled over burning joists, choking and falling, blinded, crushed by those running behind. Michiko whimpered and the sound in her head blocked the screams of those that burned. She pushed hard against her mother's shoulder, rubbing her nose raw, wanting to merge back into her mother's body. Through the lilac of her mother's kimono she breathed the muddy, black smell of burning houses, carts, clothes, mingling with the sweet indecency of singed flesh.

At the crunch of gravel under her mother's wooden *geta* she opened her eyes and saw they were crossing the bridge over the Imperial moat. The water sparkled and glowed as if it were trying to swallow the fire, to keep them safe. Beside the palace walls they were jostled by the gathering crowd and she pressed her ear against the reassurance of her mother's back, screwing her eyes shut.

At last, they stood still. With her right ear tuned to the outer world, she heard the dull roar of the conflagration, the howling of the incendiaries, the low throbbing of the silver bombers. Around her the crowd murmured, a baby bleated a lament. With her left ear she listened to her mother's internal world - the lungs that drew rasping breaths, the heart that hammered a gallop - as the wave of her mother's fear coursed into her, sweeping away sanctuary. She gripped her fingers tight together beneath her mother's throat until she felt the prick of pins and needles. Then the muscles in her mother's back moved, and the wisps of hair at her neck brushed Michiko's temple. Her mother was looking up. Michiko looked too, and saw the vast burning flower, a giant sun god triumphant over the night, the source of the dreadful roar.

Her mother began to weep. Michiko was rocked by her sobbing. Closing her eyes against the lullaby of her mother's tears, a deep, erasing numbness overcame her, and she slept.

A Korean Cabinet

It is an antique reproduction of high quality, thirty years old, but made to look two hundred. Crafted from dark zelkova wood, its top curls gently upwards at each end, like that of a temple roof. Its feet are carved curves. The cabinet stands waist-high and its width is that of a child's hug. It has two cupboards, one above the other, their sets of small double doors belying larger spaces within. The doors are fastened with ornate dark metal clasps: a ring to the right, two little catches to the left, over which the ring snaps tight. It is possible to slide a bat-shaped brass padlock, decorated with red and yellow knotted tassels, through holes in the catches. Save for these cupboards, the cabinet is marked out in rectangular panels by thin bands of darker wood. Amongst them are two that slide out to reveal secret drawers.

“Koketsu ni irazunba koji wo ezu”

If you do not enter into the tiger's cave, you will not catch its cub

*

Erika spent her weekly day off work cleaning her own and Mrs Mackenzie's flats. About three hours for herself and two hours for her elderly neighbour. She went upstairs at two o'clock every Tuesday afternoon, taking a week's worth of casseroles and soups to put in the eighty-two year old widow's fridge — aware this was the safety net that kept her out of a care home — and ended the cleaning session with a chat over a cup of tea and a biscuit. Mrs Mackenzie was frail. The stories she told as she reminisced over old photographs and various prized objects were full of strength and emotion, belying the brittle body that sat curled within her enormous armchair. She often repeated herself, but Erika didn't mind hearing the stories again. They reconnected something unidentifiable and broken deep inside her. When it was time for her to get on with her own cleaning, she'd leave clutching a shopping list and a purse containing twenty pounds from Mrs Mackenzie's pension. She delivered the groceries before her afternoon shift two days later, allowing her to check the widow was all right. Mrs Mackenzie had two daughters and five grandchildren. Her daughters were very busy people. They rarely visited.

All this kept her from swimming into uncharted waters of empty time. She was glad of the hours she allotted to cleaning her flat and to Mrs Mackenzie, since it kept her safe during her one day off work. If it weren't for Mrs Mackenzie, she would happily work seven days a week. She'd put it to André once, before she'd got to know her neighbour. He'd said he'd be more than happy to let her kill herself working every day of the week if she wanted to, if it weren't for the miserable bastards at the HSE. He'd never had anyone complain about having too much time off, he'd said, and frankly mate, she was a bit of a freak, but he forgave

her because she was actually a fucking awesome sous-chef and unlike Frankie O'Connell, had a nice arse. She'd grimaced at him before getting back to her station to prep her *mise* for evening service.

When her flat was clean, with everything in its place, she felt all right. She navigated the rest of her day off in a trance of shifting, dusting, polishing. It was a ritual of righting herself. If Archie spent the night with her more than three times a week, things began to unravel. The spoons got jumbled up with the knives, the bar of soap became embedded with black curls of pubic hair, mismatched socks emerged from the washing machine. She'd feel a tension growing inside her, like a spring winding her ever more tightly, until despite herself – she liked Archie such a lot, and knew how lucky she was to have him – she shrivelled and closed inwards, could no longer look him in the eye until she had to ask him, please, would he mind staying away for a while. She didn't want to hurt him. She was glad he never took it personally. He was secure in himself, whatever storms cast her adrift. He had become her anchor.

She took longer than usual today, doing the windows, which she hadn't washed for weeks. The window cleaners who scaled up the building twice a year weren't due for a while yet. Still, she worked up a sweat, balling up newspaper and giving her side of the glass a good polish with vinegar, a tip Mrs Mackenzie had given her. She scrubbed in vain at marks before realising they were on the other side of the glass, but once she was done, she had the satisfaction that on the inside, at least, it was clean. Next, she unscrewed the smoke alarms from the ceiling, tiptoe-wobbling on a chair, so she could dust them. After that, she emptied the kitchen cupboards so she could wipe down the shelves. When it was time for lunch she worked through without stopping. She wasn't hungry. She'd lost her appetite that morning after checking her emails.

She vacuumed the carpet on the other side of the dining table, keeping her head down. The hose caught the edge of the dark Korean antique cabinet that sat in an alcove. She yanked it free. The machine toppled to its side with a whine.

Damn it.

She stooped to right the Hoover again, and standing up too quickly, staggered and crashed against the cabinet. To keep from falling, she grabbed at the dining table and a piece of paper wafted off it onto the floor at her feet.

As she bent to pick it up a strangled sound escaped her. She kicked the *off* switch on the Hoover and sank into a chair, the unread email she'd printed out that morning in her hand. She'd seen the subject heading and sender in her inbox and knew she had to deal with it. But she hadn't been able to, then. It filled her with such anxiety it made her nauseous. She held it in front of her now, willing herself to focus on the words. The Japanese words were typed in Roman script, to make them easier for her to understand.

Kei wanted to visit her in London. She'd been thinking about her aunt a great deal recently, she wrote, and wanted to revisit the place she'd last spent time with her. Could she please visit Auntie Michiko's English grave? Was it near London? She was sure Erika hadn't meant to withhold this information from her, although it would have been nice to hear where her aunt's remains were buried. She understood that as Auntie Michiko's only child, there was a heavy duty of responsibility on Erika, but Kei knew she could trust her, as a descendant of the Takigawa clan, to fulfil them. She was sure Erika recognised her duties in accordance with the virtue of filial piety.

Erika drew a deep breath, forcing herself to read on.

Of course, she would stay in a hotel so as not to trouble her. She was thinking of arriving towards the end of August and would stay for a fortnight. Would she please be so kind as to find her a hotel close to Erika's house? She knew most of the hotels in her neighbourhood were expensive, but she did so want to stay close to her cousin. Perhaps she would be good enough to find her one where the rates were not so high.

Erika would reply later, once she felt calmer, once she'd had a good night's sleep. She unplugged the Hoover and kicked the recoil button, the cable snapping as it reeled itself in. She walked into the kitchen and looked in the fridge, but her appetite hadn't returned.

She put the kettle on for a cup of chamomile tea. It was still early but she was tired and ready for bed. She'd spent the whole day cleaning. She'd run the duster across every windowsill, wiped down curtain rails and skirting boards. Every surface reflected the late afternoon light and glimmered cleanliness. The smoke alarms stood sentinel, dusted and ready. The carpets were lint free; the bathroom tiles shone, the kitchen cupboards were spotless.

Only the dark antique Korean cabinet, topped with its sombre arrangement of objects, stood neglected in its alcove. It was furry with a thick layer of grey dust. Erika hadn't cleaned it. She hadn't cleaned it in years.

Dai Nishō

*

Like Morse code, the sun's rays flashed on and off, on and off the surface of the water between green paddy rows as their train trundled past. That's rice, her mother said, and Michiko puzzled at how such slender glass-like shoots could turn into the rapture of a bowlful of steaming white rice. Michiko leaned into her mother's body. As the train swayed them in unison, her head knocked against her mother's ribs. Gazing up at her profile, she still thought her lovely, even though her now hollow cheeks made her look too old, too weary.

They had not brought any rice back with them; all her mother had been able to trade for their bags of *hōji* tea were the same dusty, wrinkled sweet potatoes. There was no more barley. Green vegetables could be found if one knew where to look, but were too expensive. Meat and fish was no longer available. Nobody knew how long this war would last.

Michiko's mother searched for whatever she could to keep her family alive during this endless privation. The stock of tea from their shop was running low. Michiko and her siblings knew nothing of their mother's fears. They did not know that they would soon be reduced to eating grass, worms, and dumplings made with sawdust, as some of their neighbours had started to do.

On the island where I grew up, her mother would say, we grew our own food and caught fish. We would not starve if we were there. And her eyes would grow unfocused, gazing at inward horizons. Michiko did not ask questions. She knew that her mother, her exceptional beauty exchanged for a handsome dowry, had been sent over a thousand miles away from Okinawa, where she was born, to marry her father, but that was all.

At home, all that remained in the kitchen crock was a thin layer of rice, saved for honoured guests. Whenever Michiko, her brother and sister played the Eating Game, they

hauled off its wooden lid and peered in, imagining that the rice was to be prepared for them. They arranged their drawings on the table, of bowls of earthy *misoshiru* with glossy, slimy *nameko* mushrooms, cubes of tofu and sweet green cress, of stewed pork and ginger, of spinach and pounded sesame sauce. Next to these they laid out pictures of dishes piled high with yellow *takuan* pickle and sweet egg omelette. These were the simple, familiar things they craved. They would sit around the table with *chawan* rice bowls filled with gravel from their father's garden — don't you chip your *chawan*, now, warned their mother - and take up their chopsticks. *Itadakima~su!* they would cry, and pretend to tuck into a meal.

The layer of rice in the crock was so sparse they could see through it to the clay bottom. They had not eaten rice for a very long time. A month ago an important business associate of their father's had come to visit. The children had stared as their mother scooped a meagre cupful out of the crock and washed it with care so as not to lose a single grain before steaming it in the smallest pot she had. They clustered around, inhaling the fragrant steam, getting in her way until she had shooed them upstairs where they played out their food game: Fusae, would you like a piece of my salmon? Oh yes please, that would be wonderful. Would you like some more pork cutlet, Kensuke? Why no, I couldn't, I'm quite full, thank you. It was a game, but one accompanied by pain.

Their stomachs were distended, tight as drums and painful to touch. It seemed odd to them that their stomachs should be so empty and yet look so full and round. Their faces were permanently slicked with the dirty yellow oozing from their noses. They had grown so desperate with hunger that Kensuke cried out down the stairs — Mother, if he leaves anything, can I have it? The guest left his rice bowl and his pickles untouched, and though this earned Kensuke a brutal beating from his father, it was worth it for his two morsels of rice. They shared it, the five of them, eating a mouthful each, and after they had all taken their turn, one final, tiny portion remained in the bowl. Michiko reached out a second time with her chopsticks. In the next heartbeat her father whipped a metal skewer from the *hibachi* full of white-hot charcoal and seared her fingers with it. This rice is for Kensuke, her father

said, as Michiko screamed. He is a boy; he should have it, he needs to be strong. Stop your noise, Michiko, or you will be punished again. She cried silent, fat tears, the burned skin on her hand rising into an angry welt. The girls watched their brother gulp down the rice, tears trembling at the edges of his eyes from the beating and from the pleasure of food in his mouth, and Michiko thought that if she had been given the rice, she would have eaten it grain by grain, slowly, savouring it, making it last.

Digesting the mouthful of rice caused Michiko mild discomfort. After months of eating the same sweet potato gruel, her stomach found the rice too unfamiliar. *Shoyu* had once flavoured the gruel but this, too, had run out. She was so tired of eating the plain gruel that despite the eternal gnawing of her hunger she sometimes gagged as she ate.

Even so, as they swayed along in the train, Michiko looked at the *furoshiki* bundle misshapen with gnarled sweet potatoes in her mother's lap and could not wait for her day's meal when they got home. It was the only way to lessen the grinding ache inside. She wondered whether one day the walls of her stomach and the skin of her back would touch, despite the bulge of her belly. Her mother had taken in her baggy *monpe* trousers so many times she had given up trying, and they had been held up with a belt of red cotton rope. Now her belly was swollen, she didn't need the belt any more.

There was shouting in the next carriage. Her mother's body tensed against hers. Women got up, began wrenching open windows. *The military police! The police are on the train! Quickly!* And as they chugged past verdant hills and rice paddies, the women threw their bundles out. They rolled down the railway embankment, *furoshiki* popping open, sweet potatoes and cabbages rolling out into muddy ditches, and then her mother was standing too, pulling at the window. *Hurry! Michiko! Help me!* She was pushing, pushing the bundle against the gap in the window, but it would not fit. The window was too high for Michiko to reach. Her mother sat back down, breathing hard, and with shaking hands undid the *furoshiki*. Michiko passed the potatoes, one by one, to her mother, who hurled them out of the window.

They had barely emptied the *furoshiki* before three policemen burst through the door at the end of the carriage, herding a couple of cowering women before them. One of them thrust out his chest, hands on hips, and bellowed: *Black market trading is an imprisonable offence! It is an act of disloyalty to the Emperor! Let these women be an example to you!* He shoved hard at the back of the grey-haired woman in front of him. Frail and gaunt, she crumpled like a winter *kimono* slipping off its wooden rack, landing on her knees. *Get up!* He pushed at her so that each time she tried to rise up, she fell back down. *Idiot! Get up!* A baby began to wail. The women were herded towards the front carriage. At the next station, they were taken off the train. Michiko's mother didn't know where they would end up. *Nobody knows.*

The train rumbled on; Michiko watched farmers in the fields hoeing rows of vegetables, tending to the rice shoots. She could not understand. The sound of weeping disturbed the air around them here and there. Her mother's dry eyes looked dead ahead. Her mouth was set tight. Only her fingers moved, curling and uncurling around the empty *furoshiki* cloth in her lap, tying and untying the corners.

That night they ate a broth of water boiled with a square of *kombu* seaweed her mother had already used for countless pots of broth; in their bowls floated one dumpling each, made with sawdust and a little flour. Michiko was so ravenous she nearly swallowed hers whole. Her mother had barely cleared the table before Michiko had vomited it up in the garden and earned a slap from her father for messing up his treasured flowerbeds. She used his trowel to bury it, her knees sinking into the dirt. She wondered if she should collect some of the earthworms burrowing there to eat, like some of their neighbours were doing. Her mother was helping Fusae and Kensuke get ready for their bath. Her father was in his study. No, she couldn't bring herself to touch the worms.

With no one else in the garden, she crouched forward, lowering her forehead onto the earth, allowing its coolness to spread down to the feverish red spots on her cheeks. The dirt muffled her sobs. She watered the garden with her tears and the soil stuck to her face,

mingling with long strings of green snot. The immaculately pruned shrubs scratched at her hair. The loamy smell of the earth between the smooth stones nourished and soothed her. It smelled good enough to eat. She pushed her lips into it and she licked away what clung there. It was gritty between her teeth, but tasted of strength. Her father wouldn't let her mother grow vegetables or potatoes in this earth. She asked her mother why – it was too dangerous to ask him – and her mother had given her a strange, sad smile and said that he wasn't prepared to rip out his camellias. They'd been growing there for generations, she said, tended by her father's father and her grandfather's father before that, and it was part of their family heritage, their tradition. The garden was full of poetry, her father had said, full of poetry and beauty. Poetry was eternal, while all living things were ephemeral. If he ripped the beauty out, what would be left?

An Onigiri Basket

A rectangular lunch basket with a well-fitting lid, it can hold three Onigiri rice balls – or five, if kneaded smaller, without fillings. It is made to look like woven wicker, allowing air to circulate within, but is a sturdy plastic of good quality. Its sides fold down to a slim rectangle so the base fits, snug, into its lid. It is kept in its nest of old Tupperware, creamy white in a sea of Seventies orange, pea green and brown. It is practical, space-saving and made to last. It has held Onigiri - and on rare occasions, neatly cut sandwiches - for more than thirty years.

“Gohan muda ni suruto me ga tsubureru”

Waste rice and you'll go blind.

*

Oi!

She realised she'd been dozing. The splashes and shrieks of kids high on summer holidays rose above the white noise of waves breaking on pebbles and spilled into her consciousness, driving her further from sleep. She kept her eyes closed, screwing them up against the sun, which glared amber through her lids. Sweat trickled into her ear. She wiped it on her towel with an exasperated sideways shove of her head.

Her deck chair slipped down on one side, its wooden legs sinking between the beach pebbles beneath her. She gasped and sat up.

Oi! Erika! Sarah! You coming in or what?

She wriggled to right her chair, then, pulling her towel over her head, wiped sweat off her face. Bloody hell, it was hot. Not hot enough to persuade her into the water. It could never be hot enough for that.

Sarah was stretched out on the chair beside her, her freckles obscured by a floppy straw hat. She flipped up the brim and looked at her friend. *You're awake.*

Fucking Frankie, waking me with his hollering. Erika spread the towel over the back of her chair and flopped back. *I was having such a nice little snooze.* Erika took a swig of water. *You're not going in, are you?*

Yeah, probably. Why don't you come in with Luca and me? It'll cool you down.

Thanks. No.

Not even a paddle?

No.

C'mon, how often do we... Sarah saw Erika's expression and frowned. *Are you okay?*

I'm fine. Really. I just... I just don't like the sea. Erika hugged her arms with an imperceptible shiver, despite the heat.

Luca sat on an inflatable lilo between them, his face fierce with concentration. He was scribbling loopy shapes into a giant sketchpad with fat crayons. He flicked over to a new page with a dramatic flourish and drew a huge yellow oval in the middle.

Erika leaned over him. *Hey. What's that, a sun?*

He drew a black horizontal line across it and above it, two black dots, like hard pebbles. *Noooo!* He chortled. *That's you, silly!*

A Frisbee glanced off Erika's shoulder, spraying water everywhere.

Luca stood up. *Hey! You wet my picture!*

Erika dabbed at the sketchbook with her towel. *Fuck's sake, Frankie!* The other chefs were laughing. Frankie was walking up towards them to retrieve it, arms outstretched and head cocked in mock supplication.

You said a bad word. Luca was back at his drawing pad.

Erika pulled a guilty face at Sarah.

Ach, dinnae worry.

Frank stood dripping over then and gestured to the boy. *Come on! Let's play Frisbee in the waves.*

Can I, Mummy?

Sarah heaved herself up. *You need your wings on. Come here, darling.*

Erika watched Sarah blow air into the orange armbands. Luca was skipping an impatient jig, slipping about on the stones. *Just wait!* Sarah called out between puffs. *Stand still, there's a sweetie.*

Erika's heart beat fast. She looked again at Luca's sketchbook. Her yellow face was framed with a bristling black mane. The line for a mouth and dots for eyes were expressionless. *Just a kid's picture.* She flicked back a few dog-eared pages. Great pink

balloon faces with gaping red grins and blonde bubble hair. Blocky bright cars with giant faces lolling from windows. Green scribble-trees, crooked houses with chimneys, orange smiley suns with red rays. She turned back to her portrait. A black line for a body, arms and legs, and claws for hands. Behind it, an intense blue-black scribbling: the sea, with nobody in it. It looked dark and fathomless. The stick figure stood before the waves alone, lipless mouth clenched tight shut.

Erika watched as Sarah walked with Luca into the waves. Her mouth was dry; she raised her water bottle to her lips and noticed her hand shaking. Luca was knock-kneed with excitement, dancing his little dance, flailing his arms. The puffed-up wings made them look like spindly sticks. A big wave broke against him and he staggered and clutched at his mother, squealing. Erika realised she was clenching her fists.

She suddenly felt tired. She slumped back into the deckchair. Perhaps she should have another nap. It was a late finish to service last night, eighty-four covers. After desserts were all out and they'd cleaned their stations they'd spent another hour mopping and disinfecting the floor.

It had been an emotional evening. Just past midnight Chef André had screamed himself hoarse down the phone at Peter about how that was fucking it, he wasn't fucking well opening his fucking kitchen again until Peter'd fucking well fixed the pile of bollocks drains and he wasn't going to stand in a pile of fucking sewage while trying to serve up fucking lobster fucking quenelle with fucking truffle velouté when everything fucking stank of shit. And he could fucking well consider his fucking restaurant closed until Peter got the fucking plumbers in and fucking fixed it, and properly this time. *We are not fucking running* – here he'd paused for breath, his eyes bulging – *a cocksucking Wimpy Bar*.

They continued to mop around him. Erika had glanced up and seen Sarah miming a cheer. They got the rest of the week off. At their usual post-work session at the Queen's Head, they'd clinked celebratory glasses and declared that the next day, given the scorching weather, they'd get the train down to Brighton.

She must have dozed off again because she didn't notice Archie standing over her until she felt his shadow cool her face. She opened her eyes and squinted at his outline, black against the sun. She raised herself up to meet his kiss. *You're early.*

Just two lessons this morning, and the staff meeting this afternoon was cancelled. Too hot. They need to get air conditioning in that building. The students were whingeing and whingeing. Except for Mamoru and Keiko.

Doing gaman. Putting up with everything without complaining.

Yeah. They study hard, too. They get perfect scores on every vocab test. He kicked off his shoes and peeled his shirt over his head.

Good old national stereotypes. Erika draped his shirt over her head to block out the sun.

Come on, come in with me. Just knee-deep. He took her hand.

She pulled it back. *No.*

Nothing's going to happen except a cool down.

I said no. She pulled his shirt off her face and squinted at him against the sun. She hugged her knees to her chest. *You know I can't.*

He smoothed his fingers through her cropped hair and down to her shoulder where a *koi* carp of red and gold rippled across her skin. *Whatever, babe. I'm going in.*

Erika watched him pick his way across the shingle down to the water. He kissed Sarah in greeting, saluted the swimming chefs and gave Luca a high-five. Then, arms stretched out to the sides, he strode into the sea against the waves, bounding over them towards Frankie and the others. He made it look easy.

A movement distracted her. Beside her, Sarah's blouse was flapping in the wind, working loose, ready to fly away. Erika grabbed it and stuffed it in her friend's handbag.

There were so many day-trippers down in Brighton today. She could hear them screaming as the rollercoaster thundered and rattled at the end of the pier.

Archie was heading out of the waves, back towards her. She stood up for a hug. The chill of his sea-drenched body cut through the heat of her skin and made her gasp. Her arms poked up in gooseflesh. She closed her eyes, feeling seawater drip off his chin onto the crown of her head. She held onto him and she felt him breathing. *Kei's coming*. She kept her eyes closed.

What?

Her ears were squashed against his arms and his voice was muffled. *She's booked her flights. It's done*.

He leaned back to look at her. The sound of waves on pebbles, the screaming, the rattling and the Wurlitzer on the pier all flooded back with a roar.

Shit. That's sudden. When's she coming?

End August. She flicked pebbles with her toe.

Jesus. What are you going to do?

What do you mean, 'what am I going to do'?

You know, about the whole...thing.

There's not much I can do about it now, is there? She flopped back into her deckchair.

Why did you say yes to her?

I don't have a choice.

Yes you do. You don't even like her. Let her stay in a hotel.

Erika gasped, exasperated. *You don't understand.*

For fuck's sake, Erika, try to see it from my side, won't you? All I see is the stress you put yourself through.

She tutted, pulled a book out of her bag and pretended to read.

You could have said you were going to be away, or something.

She slapped the book down on her lap and glared at her lover. *Please. Stop.*

He grabbed a towel and scrubbed at his hair. *Suit yourself. Just spare me all the grief when she comes.*

She must have drifted off again, because the next time she opened her eyes, someone had spread a picnic blanket over the pebbles along with a motley assortment of cutlery, plates and plastic containers. Frankie, Charlie, Martin and Archie were cracking open beers. Luca sat on his lilo, tucking into a Marmite sandwich. Sarah was back in the chair beside her.

The sleep had done Erika good. She pulled the cooler bag out from under her chair and unpacked a giant steel thermos filled with *hōji* tea; some cups; *nori*-speckled rice crackers; bright yellow *takuan* pickles; some plates; a cream coloured plastic wicker box whose lid she lifted off to reveal a neat black and white row of *onigiri* rice balls and a smaller orange Tupperware with a seaweed and cucumber salad flecked with sesame seeds. Luca was hopping about, examining his mother's picnic basket — *Ooh, cheese strings!* — before skipping over to Frankie. *Urgh, what's that in there?*

That, my little friend, is what's left of last night's Indian takeaway. He shovelled a forkful into his mouth. Archie loaded his plate with a couple of *onigiri*, salad and pickle. Erika poured *hōji* tea for them both and passed around the rice crackers.

Frankie peered over. *Is that all you brought, Erika? Nip food?*

She scowled. *The word to use is 'Japanese'.*

Damn fine food, said Archie, rice sticking to his chin.

I've seen those rice ball things at the Japan Centre. Frankie grabbed one and bit into it. He nodded appreciatively. At the second bite he screwed up his face. *Jesus! What the fuck is the middle?*

Frankie! Luca, said Sarah.

Umeboshi. Salted plum. It's good for you.

Urgh. So's an enema. He threw it into his empty curry carton.

Hey!

The tone in Erika's voice made Frankie look up. *What?*

You can't just chuck that out!

I don't want it.

It's rice. You can't just throw it away like that. Erika's throat tightened.

Well, you eat it then.

It's covered in disgusting old curry and your fucking spit. Oh my god, you don't know anything! She got up.

Jeez, Erika, it's just a goddamn rice ball. Lighten up, for fuck's sake.

Fuck you, Frank.

She pushed herself out of her deckchair and stalked down the beach, towards the sea. At the waterline she sat down, her back to the others. The pebbles hurt her backside. She picked up a round, white stone, stroking its smoothness before making a fist around it. She leaned forward to touch the sea's brim. Exhausted, she rested her forehead on her arms. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the tail of the *koi* carp on her shoulder. She shrugged, once, twice, so that it twisted and turned in the sun, as if it were trying to swim free. She let the sea spume tickle her fingertips. Then, in one swift movement, she flicked salt water on to her face, just in case there were tears. No one saw her do it.

Dai Sanshō

*

For Michiko, this was the natural order of the world.

Heart-pumping dashes triggered by wailing sirens; the scarcity of food, of everything; rousing military songs manufactured from empty bravado; the frantic waving of *Hinomaru* flags to see off young men who swapped school uniforms for fatigues; women weeping at news of a son's, a father's, a husband's, a brother's death. There had always been padded, peaked hoods stitched from old *futon* quilts for protection against the eternal bombing raids — though when a bomb fell on her friend Maki-chan's house, *her* hood didn't protect her, and she died. Life had always been grey; adults had never smiled; everyone had always been uncertain and afraid. Sometimes when she was playing, she would forget about the world, just for a moment. But then the gnawing in her stomach or the fatigue in her legs would stop her from skipping and wrench her back to the dreadful heaviness.

Kensuke told her it hadn't always been this way. She didn't believe him, at first. But he insisted there'd been a time when there was always plenty to eat, when her mother threw back her head and laughed, and when, in the summer, they would dance around a bonfire at *Obon* time, to honour the spirits of the dead; when the *kamishibai* man came on his bicycle with his wild tales told on faded wooden storyboards, handing out pink shrimp crackers and sour plum jam. How once, before even Fusae was born, their mother and Ken had travelled far south, to the far-away island where their grandmother lived. He couldn't remember much about it because he had only been a baby, but he knew it was a magical place where warm breezes blew. It was an island of lush flowers, sacred places and ancient rocks and trees. It was surrounded by bright blue seas full of fish, and its fields were full of tasty vegetables. The island people lived until they were a hundred years old, he said. Michiko thought it

sounded like one of those mythical stories her father's mother liked to tell. She couldn't believe that there had once been a life unburdened by sorrow and fear and hunger.

She saw things a seven year old should not see; eviscerated dogs, intestines spilling into the road; soldiers missing both legs, covered in sores and begging in streets; women demented with grief, howling and ripping at their hair. Twisting into demons and ogres, these visions revisited her in the night and she would awake, screaming. Her mother would crouch beside her. If Michiko did not quieten soon enough and woke her father, he would bellow — *Yakamashii! Shut up!* — frightening her to louder sobs. Her mother would beg in a whisper — *please Aya, stop crying, or you will make your father very angry* — and when she could not, he would rise up from his *futon* and with swift steps come to her. Looming over her, tall and dark, with the full length and strength of his arm he would strike at her head until she fell silent.

They were not in their house when it was hit. It was not flattened like some of their neighbours' houses. From the front, the house appeared intact, but the rear half was destroyed, roof tiles and splintered wood cascading into the garden. It wasn't safe to live in any more. Her mother had buried family documents and treasures in a corner of the garden, hidden in earthenware jars, so they took only the things they needed and went to live with the Hasetanis. All four Hasetani sons were at war. Their father sat stooped and mute in vacant reverie every day, so his wife was glad of the company. She accepted bags of tea from the rapidly diminishing Takigawa shop stocks in lieu of rent. The room they shared was smaller than her father's study at home and Michiko could not escape him.

What she wanted most was for him to ignore her. When he did not, it was to smack her head from behind as he passed, or to tap out his pipe on her head, filling the room with the smell of singeing hair. If her mother was present, she would murmur at him — *my dear...* — but knew better than to stop him. Michiko wished her father would go away to war like her friends' fathers, but Fusae said he'd already fought in another war when he was barely a man, the one in China, and that he'd seen terrible things — *I think he had to kill lots of people*, she

whispered, shuddering; *that's why he's become so scary*. Now he was too old to fight. The government said it was important for traditional Japanese trades to keep going the best they could. Even if nobody bought much tea these days, there was still much planning and organising to be done. He would sit cross-legged at a low table in the little room that was their temporary home, bowed over his ledgers.

You must be good, Michiko, said Fusae, *and not make father so angry. He works very hard for us.*

Mother too, said Michiko.

Michiko liked it best when she was in the kitchen with her mother and Hasetani-san. She liked helping her mother cook gruel by stirring it in the pot over the fire, or watching sweet potato skins blister and turn golden over glowing charcoal in the *hibachi*, but most of all, she liked to listen to the women's stories. Some of them were funny, like the one about Hasetani-san's youngest son Takeshi, who, when he was a little boy, stuck a bean up his nose to see if it would grow. Other stories frightened her, though she couldn't help but listen. The most terrifying ones were about the war. The one about Yamashita-san's husband gave her the worst nightmares. He had come home with only one arm — the other had been blown off in Burma — and it was said that the Americans had found it in the jungle and eaten it. Americans liked to eat human flesh, people said, butchered from men they'd tortured and women they'd ravaged. She imagined American soldiers slashing at women with daggers until their insides burst out, like the dog she had seen on the street. She wondered why they didn't ravage the men, too, but was too afraid to ask. She was terrified; the Americans couldn't be human — surely they were monsters!

Things felt impermanent. Michiko didn't like how that made her feel. They were only living in the Hasetani house for a short time, but she didn't know when they might go back to live in their old house again. When she asked her mother, she said it would be rebuilt once the bombs stopped dropping, once the war was over, because it might get knocked down again. No, she didn't know when that might be. *But mightn't a bomb fall on this house, too?*

asked Michiko. *And what if we are all inside? Will we die, like Maki-chan?* But her mother just carried on scrubbing clothes in the wooden washtub.

Michiko was forbidden from going back to the old house, so when she went there to play she went alone, in secret. She pretended she was living there with her mother, brother and sister during the idyllic time Ken-chan had told her about, the time Before the War. She would sit under the smashed beams of the old room overlooking the garden. Before her on the *tatami* she would lay out plates of broken tiles filled with stones and petals. She would pretend-eat this miraculous, endless feast with twigs for chopsticks. As soon as one plate emptied, it was filled again, like the enchanted rice bag the Dragon Princess gave Hidesato as a reward in the folktale, *Tawara Tōda*. But as dusk fell she would hurry back to the tiny room she shared with her father and the others. She would swallow the same small portion of flavourless gruel she had every day, her stomach gnawing with hunger, and wait for something to happen. What that something was, she didn't know.

One hot day in August, news came of a terrible thing that happened in the south west of Japan. A bomb that shone more brightly than a thousand suns had fallen on a busy city. A second fell, three days later, on another. The bombs flattened a thousand buildings with typhoons of scorching wind, melting skin off people's bones. They said it was the most horrific thing that had ever happened in the entire history of Japan. There was going to be a radio announcement. Michiko listened to a small reedy voice speaking a language she didn't understand. *What is he saying?* she asked, and her father thundered at her to be quiet. They were gathered around the Hasetani's tiny radio with others from the neighbourhood, straining to hear the voice through crackling interference. That was the voice of the Emperor, Ken-chan told her afterwards. He didn't understand the words, either. *Nobody has ever heard the Emperor speak before*, said Ken-chan. *Doesn't he have a funny voice?* Michiko was surprised. Looking at the Emperor would make you go blind. Surely, hearing his voice would make you deaf? Her mother told her what the radio announcer had said after the Emperor had finished speaking: that Japan had surrendered, had lost the war. Her father sat,

silent, at his table in their room. He hardly spoke at all for three days, and Michiko knew to keep out of his way.

Her father and old Nishioka started repairs on their bombed house, shoring up the smashed rear walls to make it safe. He was determined to re-open the teashop. The carpenter and his son had still not returned from fighting in Singapore, so her father undertook to rebuild the house himself. Michiko asked her mother if her father would let them plant vegetables in the garden now, since most of it had been destroyed when the bomb fell. *Just let him get the house ready first Aya, and then we'll see, she said. One thing at a time.*

The Imperial radio announcement was still the main topic of discussion a week later, when Michiko's father began to spend entire days repairing their old home. He left the Hasetani house at dawn and returned at dusk, dusty and tired. His uncharacteristic passivity had been replaced by fierce determination. *I won't let those damned Americans stop me, he said. Those animals know nothing about tea. People will always drink good tea, war or no war. I will not be the one, after all the generations past, to break the family line.*

Ken told her that rebuilding the shop and the house was pointless because the Americans were probably going to ravage them all anyway. There was much speculation in the neighbourhood about what was to become of them. Some of the men were beginning to return from war. Many didn't, killed or missing in action. There were those who committed *seppuku* after surrender so they would never return to face the shame of defeat. There were whispers, too, about some who had returned, who were no longer right in their minds. They were ordered to do terrible things, they said, and were driven mad by it. *The shoe-maker's son just sits at the table staring into space, Nishioka-san said. He won't eat or talk. His poor mother.*

It did not take long before the house was safe enough for the Takigawas to move back in. Despite the rubble in the garden and the still-unusable room overlooking it, their lives resumed a semblance of normality. One evening when her father sat cross-legged on the veranda, Michiko crept up to him, daring to whisper, Father, are the Americans going to kill

us? He half-opened his eyes to look at her and said nothing. She flinched when he moved towards her, before slackening in astonishment as he took one of her hands in his own. He had once had the soft, smooth hands of a nobleman. Now, they felt calloused and rough against her fingers.

Later that week she found her mother crouched in the garden, her apron over her head, crying. This frightened her more than the stories, more than the Americans. Seeing her mother helpless was unbearable.

Something had happened at last. Michiko wondered if the world After the War would be the same as the world Before the War. But Fusae said when the Americans came, they would definitely be killed, maybe even eaten. Japan would never be the same again, people kept saying. They would have to get used to life with the Americans, that is, if they left anybody alive.

A Casket

It is a box covered in pale golden brocade. The cover is topped with a cream curlicue knot, which holds its folded upper corners in place. It adorns a tab which, when pulled upwards, reveals the box of white Japanese pine beneath. The wood exudes a special scent, like incense. The box is not the treasure, however, for when its lid is removed there is an urn of polished black granite nestled inside, smoothly shaped with rounded edges and carved on its side with kanji characters: a name, a date. Its weight, for something so small, lends it gravity. But the urn is not the treasure either, for the treasure lies within. The lid is held closed, simply, with Sellotape.

“Namu Shakamuni Butsu”

Homage to Shakyamuni Buddha

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At Heathrow’s Terminal Two, the escalator deposited Erika in the Arrivals Hall. She frowned at the board to see if Flight JL401 from Tokyo had landed. Being late to greet Kei was not an option. No, it hadn’t landed yet, thank god. She’d left home early but at Earl’s Court the Piccadilly Line platform was heaving with people. There were delays; earlier that morning someone had thrown themselves under a train. She’d tried not to let her mind go where it usually went whenever she heard the *Person under a Train* announcement, and bought a magazine from the kiosk to distract herself for the rest of the journey to Heathrow.

The night before, she’d lain awake, watching dawn creep past the curtains’ edges and bleach the shadows from her room. It was a hot, airless night. She fidgeted and sighed, kicking away the sheets, seeking relief in whatever cool spot she could find in the bed. Sometimes she dozed off to be ensnared in brief, claustrophobic dreams: Kei disembarking from her flight, smiling in anticipation as she passed through immigration and customs, the Arrivals Hall doors sliding open for her as she stopped to scan the waiting crowds. Erika craning over the railings, so close she could almost touch her. Erika shouting *Kei!* again and again, waving, but her cousin looking straight through her, not seeing her. Erika watching Kei’s face darken with disappointment. Erika woke herself up shouting, drenched in sweat. Too agitated to stay in bed, she got up to watch TV. Once she returned to her room she slept, though fitfully, and woke just before dawn. She lay in bed, exhausted, until her alarm went off.

Erika looked up at the board and saw the flight had landed. The knot in her belly tightened. She needed a coffee, and to sit down. Kei would take at least forty-five minutes to pass

through immigration, pick up her baggage and clear customs. Her mobile buzzed. A text from Archie. *Hope today goes OK. Call me later. Love you. x.*

Needing solitude to keep herself calm, she'd asked him to stay at his own flat the night before, but now she wished she'd asked Archie to stay over. Maybe it was just as well he hadn't; she'd have kept him awake with all her tossing and turning. He'd be in the staff room now, on his break. She headed for Café Nero and called him.

Is she with you? he asked.

Her flight's not landed. Just getting myself a coffee.

You ok?

I'm trying not to get stressed, but it's going to be such a fucking struggle.

Well – see how it goes. It's just two weeks. Give things a chance.

I wish I'd never told her she could come.

It's too late to think that now. You haven't seen her for years. Maybe you'll have fun.

Erika reached the counter. *Hold on, Arch.* She jammed her mobile between shoulder and chin while she extracted money from her wallet. *An Americano please, a triple shot.* She paid the barista, smiling and pointing at the phone, mouthing *sorry*. She moved up the counter, waiting for her pick-me-up. *Are you still there? Look, you're right, I know I'm being negative. I've been all over the place since it sunk in she was really coming. I hadn't thought it through, you know? There's that whole business with...* She trailed off. There was a long pause.

Did you hide it? he asked.

I couldn't.

You're making this more difficult.

Her coffee appeared. She took a gulp and burned her tongue.

Erika?

Look, forget I said anything. I'd rather not talk about it, okay? Now it was her turn to wait for him to speak, but he said nothing. She felt him pulling at her across empty space. *I*

can't just stuff my mum in a cupboard, can I? The rhetorical adjunct floated in the silence.

She forced a dry, sharp laugh.

Well, then, said Archie, you're just going to have to deal with it.

Sitting at a table near a window, Erika watched Lilliputian airport ground staff swarm around the jumbo jets. She hadn't flown on one of those for a while. The last time was to Japan, seven years ago. Her mind bounced off the memories like a pebble bouncing off a frozen lake. She returned to the counter to order a chocolate brioche, though she wasn't hungry, and another Americano.

This day had arrived before she was ready. She could prepare the house, but god knows how she could have prepared *herself*. Erika had read her cousin's email over and over, and it had left her paralysed. She hadn't been able to deal with its most difficult question, and was relieved Kei hadn't asked again. Email communication was perfect; she didn't want to speak to her on the phone. Erika replied that, of course, Kei could stay in her flat; that she'd take a day or two off work so she could spend time with her. Kei had booked her flight, and that was that.

Kei should get to the Arrivals Hall in about five minutes. Erika took a final swig of her coffee. It slopped down her chin and onto the white shirt she'd ironed so carefully the night before. *Shit*. She dabbed the dark stain with a napkin. *Shit. Shit*. She followed signs to the toilets, where she soaked paper towels under the tap and worked the dark brown coffee stain into beige. Now the whole front of her shirt was wet. When she looked in the mirror, not only could she see her bra through the wet fabric, but the tattoo on her shoulder. The knot in her belly turned to stone. She stooped under the hand dryer for as long as she could, plucking at her shirt, waiting for opacity to return and hide this taboo. Time was running out.

Back in the Arrivals Hall, she was alarmed at the sight of well-dressed Japanese travellers milling around. Tour guides held travel agency flags aloft. They bowed and

smiled, calling out in sweet, high-pitched voices. Erika searched through the crowds and there, looking blank, with her suitcase at her feet, was her cousin. The stone in her stomach grew heavier. Kei hadn't seen her.

Erika rearranged the dismay she knew was written on her face into a broad smile.

Kei!

Kei wheeled around and saw her. She smiled with her mouth, but her dark eyes flickered to the stain on Erika's shirt.

I'm so sorry, I was here waiting for you but I had an accident with some coffee and I had to go clean myself up, I'm really sorry, I wanted to be here when you walked through the doors. I'm so glad to see you. The Japanese words felt clumsy in Erika's mouth. She was gabbling.

Well, I'm glad to see you too, said Kei. *It's been a long flight and there were long queues at immigration. My case was one of the last to appear. I'm very tired.*

Erika's impulse to hug Kei faltered and died. It didn't matter. A hug wasn't expected.

The sight of Kei, immaculate even after her long journey, hit Erika with the stark reality of the next two weeks. How the hell was she going to get through this? The faux-pas of not being there to greet her cousin as she came through the Arrivals Hall doors, of turning up with a stained shirt were nothing — nothing compared to the moment Kei walked into her flat and saw the corner with the dusty antique cabinet, the corner that not even the ill-anticipated visit could induce Erika to clean. When they got home Kei would no longer need to ask the whereabouts of her aunt's grave. She would see the answer, right there on top of the cabinet, in its thick blanket of dust. The black granite urn carved deep with *kanji* and hidden in its box of Japanese pine, the box hidden in turn beneath its cover of silk brocade. It held a few of Erika's mother's bones, still uninterred after all these years.

A Tea Service

It is a Wedgwood tea service comprising six cups, six saucers, six cake plates, a milk jug, a sugar bowl with a lid — a small arch in its edge to accommodate a sugar spoon — and a cake stand. A cake slice with a matching porcelain handle also belongs to the set. The pattern is a popular and pretty classic of gracefully curved green-leaved stems, of dusky pink, five-petalled flowers and the tiny, vibrant-red fruit of wild strawberries from which it takes its name. The cups are simple, shaped in pleasing proportion to their handles and saucers. The plates extend a margin wider than the saucers and are big enough to hold a modest slice of cake. The cake stand rests on a single conical foot, a humble stage for whatever cake it displays. Arranged on a tray, the tea set exudes a sense of orderliness, of comfort, of life in an English country cottage.

“Oyafukō”

Filial disloyalty

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The early rush hour provided a respite from the awkwardness of their meeting. At Hammersmith they swept off the Piccadilly Line train with the crowd and onto the Hammersmith & City Line. Kei took the last vacant seat in the carriage, Erika guarding the suitcase at the end of the row of seats, gripping the handrail until her knuckles shone white. Kei stared ahead, used to maintaining personal space in crowded places. Erika examined her cousin's profile unobserved, poised to avert her eyes in case Kei turned to look at her.

The blue-black hair on either side of her ruler-straight, white parting was smoothed into a chignon. She must have done it up just before getting off the plane; it was so neat. She wore a beige Burberry trench coat that looked new. Where Kei's slender neck disappeared into the collar, Erika saw the glint of a thin gold chain. The coat was buttoned so its pendant was hidden. Foundation dusted her flawless skin and she wore a pale slick of lip-gloss, but no eye makeup. She looked younger than her years. Erika gazed upon Kei and thought of austerity and purity.

Kei turned without warning and caught Erika staring. Her face broke into a wide smile. It was blinding. Erika flushed, returning it with a hesitant imitation. And then, as quickly as it came, Kei's smile disappeared. She turned away and returned to her look of blank absorption. Only the heat in Erika's cheeks was proof she hadn't imagined it.

The train rumbled alongside the Westway, where towers rose up on either side of the flyover, indifferent to the traffic jams below. At Ladbroke Grove they shuffled off the train and out into the cacophony of the street. Double-deckers belched grey fumes as they ground their way up the hill. Erika and Kei squeezed through a rude tide of school kids jostling and shouting at the bus stop; Erika felt the tension in Kei's bowed head and braced shoulders. Boys wore trousers slung dangerously low; girls had ties knotted loose over open shirts, fake

diamonds glittering in noses and ears. A tall girl kissed her teeth and shrieked in mock outrage, 'Tch! Fuck *off*, Germaine!' and swung to thump a boy. The girl's bag, heavy with books, smacked hard into Kei, who made herself small. Erika touched her shoulder. *Are you okay?*

Yes. How far is it to your house?

Not far.

They turned into Cambridge Terrace. Parked cars and lamp posts stood guard on either side of the street. The uniform rows of grey brick townhouses were punctuated with different-coloured doors. Window boxes here and there were either blowsy with bright geraniums, trailing ivy or ferns, or they had become coffins for brittle brown bones that had once bloomed. Dirty pigeons burst away from a squashed, half-eaten burger. The noise of Ladbroke Grove dimmed behind them and the rumble of the suitcase wheels and the click of Kei's heels grew louder, echoing off the building walls.

This one, with the red door. Erika's voice was too loud. They stood at the foot of the concrete steps, looking up at it; a threshold to enforced intimacy, a gate opening onto a minefield.

There was nothing Erika could do now. She heaved the suitcase up the steps, bumping its corners on each one. Kei caught up with her, grabbed it from her.

It's okay, I can manage, said Erika.

I'll take it, said Kei. *It's brand new. And expensive.* She stooped to rub at the scuffmarks with her fingers.

They made their way up four flights of stairs in silence. Erika unlocked her apartment door and strode through the sitting room to open her windows, letting in the air. The sun streamed in, reflecting in glints off the wooden floor. Kei put down her suitcase. *You have so much space. Very nice,* she said, looking around.

Here, I'll take your case. I promise I'll be careful. Let me show you your room. She ushered her cousin away from the sitting room with its alcove and down the corridor, into the

bedroom she had taken such pains to prepare. *I've made room in the wardrobe and drawers. Take your time unpacking. The bathroom's the next room to the right if you'd like to have a wash. When you're ready we'll have some tea.* The Japanese still felt awkward. It was a long time since she'd last spoken it.

Retreating to the kitchen, Erika put the kettle on, leaning her forehead against the cupboard above it. Kei hadn't seen the alcove as they came in but it wouldn't be long before she did. Erika felt calmer. Maybe it was because it was too late to do anything about it. The tsunami was here. She might as well let herself be swallowed up.

She heard Kei come out of the bathroom. Erika picked up the tea tray she'd prepared before she left the house that morning. She'd found the act of arranging her mother's pretty pink and green Wedgwood tea set on it reassuring — the cups, saucers and plates, the teapot, matching sugar pot and milk jug, the cake stand and its cake slice had a *there-ness* that kept her anchored. And yet, looking at them now, these familiar objects suddenly felt strange and out of place, as if they were new. The day before, Erika had unpacked them from the box they'd been stored in for years. After she washed the dust and newsprint off them, she had picked up each of the pieces, feeling their cold fragility.

She heard the wardrobe door in Kei's room closing. Erika began the ritual of preparing English tea. She poured hot water into the teapot and swirled it, holding it in her palms until it was hot. She emptied it and dried it with a clean tea towel. One teaspoonful Lapsang Souchong, two Darjeeling. The leaves, warming against the chin, released a faint perfume. She switched on the kettle again, poured boiling water over them, closed the lid and slipped her mother's blue patchwork tea cosy over the pot, although it didn't match. She put organic milk into the jug and a token inch of sugar in the sugar pot with its silver sugar spoon.

Erika had baked a cake. Fresh English strawberries and whipped Jersey double cream sandwiched in a sponge punctuated with tiny full stops of vanilla. She lifted it out of its Tupperware, laid it on the cake stand and surprised herself by smiling. It looked good. *Tea's ready!* she called, and carried the tray through to the dining table.

Kei had brought gifts. Fine *sencha* and everyday *hojicha* from the family tea shop. A box of *mizuyokan* red bean paste puddings, Erika's favourite summer sweet. Handmade letter paper from her aunt. Five hand-thrown dipping dishes in a rustic Hokkaido style from her mother's old friend, Kanagawa-san. There were practical gifts, things not available in England: dishcloths, a herbal remedy for indigestion, a high-tech duster. Erika lingered over each thing, discussing it with Kei, distracting her as long as she could. In between each unwrapping, she asked questions: about Aunt Fusae and her *ikebana* class, about Kou-chan and Mayumi-san and how the kids were getting along. How was the tea business? The neighbourhood? How was Kanagawa-san?

Kei gave short answers. She cut the cake with her fork into tiny morsels, lifting them into her small mouth one by one; she took delicate sips from her cup.

The anticipation grew unbearable. Erika wanted it to be over, but dreaded the moment. And she didn't know how to get there. It was like pulling a tooth. *And how is Jun-san? Didn't he mind you coming here without him?* she asked.

Kei picked up her cup with a clatter, peering over its rim at her cousin. When she put the cup down she was still looking at Erika, saying nothing. She and Jun had no children. Perhaps Kei didn't want to be reminded of that. It was not a subject to pursue. Erika picked up her own cup and gulped. *More tea?*

Thank you.

Erika poured, struggling to think of something else to talk about. *Later this evening I'll introduce you to Mrs Mackenzie upstairs. She's been looking forward to meeting you.*

Kei nodded, still saying nothing.

Silence settled around them. Erika thought of the dust in the alcove.

Kei put her cup down, dabbed her lips with a folded napkin. She reached into the bag Erika had thought was empty. She pulled out one more package. *This is a special gift, your last one. It's from me. I got one for myself too.* She handed Erika a parcel the size of a large matchbox, carefully wrapped in paper branded with the logo of a well-known Buddhist ware

shop in Tokyo. Erika swallowed. She peeled away the tape and took off the paper, putting the box on her lap so she could fold the paper into neat squares. She took her time. The weight of the box was surprising, given its size. When she lifted the lid it revealed something hard wrapped in fine tissue.

I wonder what it is? she said, attempting to relieve the silence. She lifted the object out. She felt its coldness through the paper.

Careful, said Kei. *Don't drop it.*

Erika rolled the paper's contents into her hand. Its coldness grew into warmth as she held it. It was a transparent cylinder of polished quartz crystal with a bulb at one end. A body and a head. It was marked with just a few simple lines and she saw then that it was a little *jizou*, a Bodhisttva. It wore a sweet, beatific expression, eyes closed in meditation. It was exquisite. Her stomach clenched. She shouldn't have eaten that cake so quickly.

Kei. It's beautiful. Thank you very much.

I thought your mother's altar might be a good place for it.

Erika stared at the *jizou* in her hand and felt her face flush. This was it. Here it came, the *tsunami*.

I'll put it there, if you like, said Kei, *since I need to pay my respects. To tell her I'm here. May I offer incense?*

Erika ran her fingers over the object in her hand. So smooth and hard. It was cold, and now it was warm.

Eri?

Yes?

Where is it?

Just round the corner, there. Erika pointed. *In that alcove, on the antique cabinet. Matches in the little drawer underneath. Feel free. I'm just going to clear the tea things.* She jumped up, started stacking plates and cups. A teaspoon slid off a saucer and fell, chipping a cup. *Shit.*

She carried the tray through to the kitchen and pushed it onto the counter with a clatter. She filled the sink with hot water, letting the suds bubble up. She washed the forks and spoons, rinsed them. She tried to calm her breathing. She caught a drift of incense. She washed the plates and saucers. The cups. She examined the chip she'd made in one of them. Her mother had owned this tea service for more than thirty years. There had not been a single crack or chip until now.

She sensed Kei standing behind her. She washed the milk jug. Rinsed it. She did not turn around.

I offered incense, her cousin said.

Good. Thanks. She emptied the sugar back into its paper bag, put it away in the cupboard. Put the sugar pot into the sink. Washed it. Rinsed it. There would be the remnants of the cake to deal with next. After that, there would be nothing left to wash up. She would have to stop, and then she would have to turn around.

Eri.

She pulled the plug and watched the water swirl away. She wiped the sink down with the dishcloth, squeezed it out so hard she hurt her fingers.

Erika.

She turned around, pretending not to notice Kei's expression. *I bought fresh mackerel from the market yesterday. I've salted it. It'll be lovely grilled. And some of those big field mushrooms I know you like. That's what we'll be having for dinner. Would you like some rice with that?*

Erika. Kei crossed her arms and frowned. *It's not good.*

Erika could think of nothing to say. She stood and stared, waiting for the deluge.

Twelve years, Eri. It's really not good. At all. Why is it still on the altar?

Erika looked at her feet.

Erika. Kei's voice grew sharp. *It's completely covered in dust. What on earth were you thinking?*

Dai Yonshō

*

The woman stumbled through the shop doors, panting. Damp strands of hair had worked themselves free of her hairpins and stuck to her face with sweat. Her hand to her chest, she leaned against the doorway, opening and closing her mouth like a fish out of water.

Nishioka-san! What's the matter? asked Chiyo.

She gasped and bent forwards, hands on her thighs. She struggled to speak. *It's so hot out there!* She plopped onto a bench, pulling a fan from her *obi* sash and began fanning herself with it. *I ran all the way! I had to tell you immediately!* Her consternation was contagious, spreading in the street behind her, people clustering in excitement. Some broke away in a run, shouting.

Chiyo's voice was steady but grew a note shriller. *What is it? Would you like some water? Whatever's the matter?*

Oh! They're here! They're here! Can you believe it?

Who? said Chiyo. *Who's here?*

The Americans! American soldiers!

The expression on Nishioka-san's face made Chiyo dash from the shop, through the still-blackened kitchen and out the back door. *Michiko! Kensuke! Fusae! Come in at once! Do you hear me?*

Hearing no answer she slipped on her wooden *geta* and ran clacking into the alleyway. It was deserted. She stood still, calming her ragged breaths so she might hear the sound of her children playing. Hearing only the murmuring of the gathering crowd at the front of the house, she ran first to one end of the alley, then the other. Not finding them, she rushed back into the shop. She stood before her neighbour, hands at her mouth. *They've gone! What will I do? What if they have been taken?*

Goodness, Takigawa-san, I'm sorry if I caused you unnecessary alarm. She mopped her brow with a handkerchief. Please forgive me my excitement. Your children will be fine — from what I've seen and heard, there's nothing to fear. They are not the murderous devils our government made them out to be. In fact, they seem to be quite the opposite.

The opposite?

Yes, yes, it's quite extraordinary...

Kensuke, as the eldest, led their little procession as they ran through the streets, holding hands. He tugged hard, yanking Fusae's arm. *Come on! Hurry up! Hurry up!*

It's not me, Ken-chan, it's Aya, she's so slow!

Why did you bring her with us? She's too little.

If we'd left her behind she would have told Mama and we wouldn't have got far before she sent someone after us. And then we wouldn't have any chance of getting anything to bring home.

Well, we won't get anything anyway if we're this slow. He was cross, close to tears. He wiped slimy trails of green snot from his nose with his sleeve. He scowled, making his sunken cheeks more prominent, his shaven head a skull papered tight with skin.

Fusae knelt beside her little sister. *Aya-chan, you know those pictures of chocolate that we play with in our Food Game? Well, if you run as fast as you can with us now, maybe you'll be able to have real chocolate to eat.*

Michiko's eyes widened. *Really?*

Hideo-kun next door got some from a G.I. and he said it's the most delicious thing he's ever eaten. Wouldn't you like to try some?

Michiko raised the tea canister she held between her bony fingers to her mouth, touching its smooth curve to her lips. It slid on her skin, lubricated with the mucus from her nose. *Stop sucking that Aya, it's dirty. Give it to me.* Fusae made to grab it but Aya growled and gripped it harder, pulling it close to her chest.

No! It's mine!

Come on, said Kensuke, hopping with impatience. *Come on! We'll miss them. We won't get anything if you don't come right now!* He grabbed Fusae's hand and pulled, making her stumble.

Alright, alright, wait. Fusae took hold of Michiko's hand. *Are you ready to run? Let's have a race! The prize for winning is chocolate!*

Michiko nodded, and they were off again. She lurched along on spindly legs which failed her now and again. Each time she fell she was dragged upright again so she could fall back into step, grazing her knees. The *geta* fell off her right foot; she cried out but they forged onwards, Michiko limping on one *geta*, alongside other children running barefoot through the dirt. Running made Michiko's distended belly hurt.

Onii-chan, I'm tired. Onii-chan! Michiko began to cry. Her knees were bleeding.

Kensuke pulled harder at his sisters. *Food! Come on! We can get something to eat! We have to hurry!* His voice cracked with desperation. And he ran on.

Michiko tripped and fell again. Her other *geta* slipped off her foot as she landed hard on one bony knee. She dropped her tea canister lid and it hit the ground with a metallic ring. She watched as it rolled towards the roadside, bounced off the kerb, spun, and disappeared down a water drain.

She howled. Fusae turned back to help her up but Kensuke would not let go of her hand and jerked her away. *Leave her!*

We can't just leave her here! What will Mama say?

We'll pick her up on our way back. We can get food for everyone if we carry on but if we keep her with us we'll get nothing. All we'll have is the same old gruel every day. His voice quavered and broke. *I'm hungry.*

Michiko lay face down in the road, shrieking. Fusae pulled herself free from her brother's grip and went to pick her up. She smoothed her hair and wiped her tears, leaving dirty trails on her cheeks. *Stop crying, Aya-chan.* She shook her sister's shoulders. *Stop now. Listen. You want chocolate, don't you?*

Michiko hiccupped and nodded.

Can you be a big, brave girl?

She nodded again.

You wait here for us, and don't go anywhere, all right? We're going to have to leave you here for a bit.

Michiko contemplated this for a moment. Then her mouth opened once again, an upside down U, and she began to wail.

Stop it! Fusae said. She shook her sister's shoulders. *If you want chocolate, you have to stop now and do what you're told. Will you wait here for us?*

My toy! howled Michiko. *My toy!*

Get her to shut up, Fusa, said Kensuke. *She's hurting my ears. What toy?*

She means her tea canister lid. She dropped it. It must be here somewhere. Fusae looked around on the ground near them.

Fusae! Kensuke was shouting. *Let's go!*

If we find it for her, she'll be quiet. Just help us, will you?

Michiko continued to howl and pointed at the grating. Fusae dropped to her hands and knees; she saw a glint of metal. *It's in here.* She pulled her sleeve up to her shoulder and tried to push her arm through, but even wasted to skin and bone it was too big to fit through the gap. *It's no use. We'll have to leave it, Aya. I can't reach it. We can get you another one.*

The wailing grew louder. *I don't want another one. I want that one. That one's mine.*

Onii-chan! Fusae clasped her head in her hands. *What shall we do?*

In answer, he grabbed Fusae's hand and pulled hard. And he ran. She held back at first, but gave up resisting and followed her brother. She turned back to look at her scrawny little sister who stood bawling in the middle of the road and called: *Be a good girl and stay there. We'll be back soon, with chocolate. Imagine! Food!*

As her brother and sister slipped away into the crowds, Michiko stood in the street and sobbed. A woman with kind eyes asked where her mother was, but Michiko didn't answer. There were so many dirty-faced starving orphans abandoned in the city. She patted her head and walked on. Tired from crying, Michiko squatted by the grating, her grazed knees tightening and stinging, and waited for her brother and sister to come back. When they came back they would help retrieve her toy. And she would have chocolate.

She could see it glinting. She pushed her hands through the grating but the metal scratched her arm. Tears welled up again. Where were *onii-chan* and *oneh-chan*? What if they didn't come back? The wails rose up again and she scrubbed at her eyes with tear-slickened fists.

She sensed a sudden quietening: a tension. She looked up. A face was descending toward her, very white, very strange, framed with hair that appeared to have no colour at all. There was a big nose in the middle of it, the biggest she'd ever seen. But the strangest thing about the face was its eyes. They were pale, the colour of the sky in summer. They frightened her; she recoiled: the eyes of a ghost! She covered her face so she didn't have to look into them. But she felt a hand on her head, smoothing her hair, and the touch was gentle. She heard words she didn't understand but the voice that spoke them was soft and warm. When she found the courage to look again, she saw the strange face smiling. It belonged to a man wearing a neat beige uniform and a peaked cap. He put his khaki bag on the ground and knelt beside her. A crowd gathered. A woman called out: *Watch out, little girl! It's a barbarian! A gaijin soldier!*

Michiko was mesmerised by the pale eyes that looked kindly upon her. He had peculiar tan freckles on his cheeks, which gave him a golden glow. She saw now that his hair was not colourless, but golden too, like his skin. He was still smiling and his face seemed to her like the sun, warming and calming her. He spoke. But even after the words stopped coming, his mouth continued to move. He was chewing something, but not swallowing. He kept chewing and chewing. What was this magic, everlasting mouthful? He rummaged around in his bag. He pulled out a small rectangle wrapped in dark brown paper with big silver letters on it, with shining silver edges. He offered it to her. She took it and felt its cool weight in her hand. He was saying something. She brought it close to her face and sniffed. It had a warm, delicious, sweet smell. *Chocolate!* She tore at the wrapping, the chocolate inside it softening against the heat.

The crowd surged forward. *Chocolate! Give me chocolate!* The soldier bolstered himself against the rush and reached again into his bag. His comrades approached with theirs, pulling out packets of cigarettes, chewing gum, chocolate and stockings. There were gasps. Packets of chocolate were ripped open and wolfed down, leaving sticky smears on cheeks. Women held up seamed stockings to the light; they had not seen such fine stockings in years.

The soldier turned back to Michiko, smiling. He was still chewing. She could not stop staring at his shining golden face. Without taking her eyes off him, she stuck her tongue out to lick a corner of the chocolate bar. It melted and spread, rich and warm, across her tongue. Oh! If happiness had a taste, surely this was it. She had never tasted anything so sweet, so delicious. He laughed at her wide-eyed, ecstatic expression. She took a nibble. And then she laughed aloud with him, for the joy of it. He watched her as she continued to eat.

Bliss flooded her body, carried her somewhere else. It felt as good as falling asleep in a soft blanket. She closed her eyes. She took a big bite and her teeth sank through the softening mass with a satisfying crunch. The chocolate melted on her tongue, coating her teeth, filling her head with overwhelming pleasure. Tears trickled from her eyes. The

tightness in her chest and the hiccupping remnants of her crying faded. She laughed again, brown-smearred mouth open wide. She gazed into the face of this smiling man and wondered. What *was* he eating? He was still chewing. Was there an everlasting chocolate? It was like magic! Who knew what magic this man, who was like the sun, could perform? Then she remembered.

My toy! She pointed at the grating.

The soldier spoke soft words that curved and rolled, like the chocolate she was eating. She understood he was asking a question; he raised his eyebrows and wore a quizzical look.

She implored him with her eyes, crouching down to jab urgent fingers at the grate.

Omocha. Omocha ga okkotchatta no.

He nodded. He understood. He understood everything. He patted her head, smiling, and she knew this *gaijin-san* would make everything all right again.

The golden man beckoned to an old man with a walking stick. He took the stick from him. He began to chew faster. The crowd around them was restless, jostling to watch, speculating on what they thought he was doing. *Be careful!* someone cried, but Michiko was not afraid. When he spat what was in his mouth into his hand, the crowd murmured. Michiko strained to see what it was. He took the stick and did something to the end of it. When he let go, she saw he had stuck a small grey ball on it.

The man poked it, end first, through the grate. His movements were slow and careful. Michiko could see how he manoeuvred it with tiny movements toward the glinting metal. When he found his mark, he pushed down, as if spearing a fish. He began pulling the stick back out and the lid came with it. Her toy was stuck to the stick! This was some kind of magic! Michiko held her breath. The golden man drew the stick back up — slowly, slowly, gently does it — and there it was, her toy, it was nearly out. And then, the rim of the lid caught the edge of the dark opening of the sewer. It came away from the stick, falling soundlessly into the depths.

The chocolate in Michiko's mouth had melted away. She felt her face flush hot with tears but she stayed quiet. The man shook his head. His face was full of sorrow. He understood. The corners of her mouth quivered. She knew, somehow, that she must not cry in front of him. She held tight to herself, clenching her fists with the effort. One small tear spilled from her eye. The man cocked his head at her with a sad smile, talking his soft words. And then, he reached into his bag again.

He pulled out a photograph of a little girl with golden hair and pale eyes like his. Her smiling face was full and healthy. She had a big red ribbon in her hair and wore a pretty dress covered with flowers. He held the picture out to Michiko, showing her. Michiko stared.

Then he pulled out a little doll, made of cloth. It had long, golden, woollen hair and wore a red and white gingham dress. Blue felt boots were tied onto its feet with white satin ribbons. Michiko had never seen anything like it. He held it out to her, nodding. She looked into his face, questioning. He nodded. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She looked up at him again, wide-eyed. *Take it, take it.* He pushed it into her arms. She scarcely believed it could be hers.

She clasped it to her chest. She beamed and beamed. He looked happy she had taken it, and at that moment she felt that this man would conjure any magic from the air for her. She wanted him to stay, so she would always be safe.

Arigatō. She squeezed the doll tight.

He ruffled her hair. He closed his bag. And then he got up, and walked away.

She didn't want him to go, but didn't know how to ask him to stay. Watching his receding back, she burned into her memory his smile, his soft words, his golden face like the sun, and his eyes the colour of the sky. She would never forget him, never, not for as long as she lived.

A Kitchen Knife

A knife, twenty-six centimetres long from handle to tip. It has a handle of dark brown wood and its double-ground blade, fourteen-and-a-half centimetres long, has been honed on a whetstone many hundreds of times. Its edge has always been kept razor-sharp. The side of the blade, made of finest tempered Shirogami steel, is etched with the kanji characters KiYa, meaning House of Wood. It is a 'Kamagata-Japan', a hybrid European-style knife that became popular in Japanese post-war homes. When picked up in preparation for cutting, the handle fits snugly in the palm of the hand. Its blade and handle are perfectly counterbalanced, so that without resistance, in one, smooth, unthinking motion, the knife will slice through fish, vegetables, meat and even through small bones.

“Giri — Ninjō”

Duty — compassion

*

The next morning, Erika suggested an early breakfast in Portobello Market before heading into town. She couldn't face eating with Kei, the two of them alone together in the house, the altar brooding in the alcove.

Erika had dodged the worst of what she knew was yet to come. She had stood in the kitchen, unable to speak, while Kei searched her face for an answer. Erika hadn't been able to explain why she hadn't dealt with her mother's bones because she just didn't know. She hadn't given them any thought. The years had passed and there they still were, sitting on the Korean cabinet.

The long, wordless minutes Erika and her cousin stood facing one another in the kitchen had felt like a physical pain. But once it was clear an answer was not to be forthcoming that evening, Kei had called upon her jetlag and retired to bed. Erika's relief was that of a prisoner given a temporary stay of execution.

After a second night of broken sleep, the cousins greeted one another in the morning, unspoken words lying beneath the surface like unexploded mines. Erika was exhausted, but she had to get them both out of the house. London provided enough distraction to create a safe path through the minefield, at least, for now. The colourful bustle and noise of her local market was a good start.

It was busy. Erika walked fast, pushing through gaps in the crowds, nipping between traders' stalls. She was almost at the Electric Diner when she realised Kei was no longer with her. Retracing her steps, she found her cousin stuck behind a crowd of Italian tourists, too polite to push.

I lost you, Erika said.

You're too fast.

Come on, or we won't get a table.

Kei followed close behind. Each time Erika turned back to check, her cousin's head was bowed in apology to those she pushed past. The sight drove her mad. Somehow she resisted the temptation to grab her hand, and they got the last free table at the Electric Diner, squeezing in between a group of chattering Spaniards and a couple who sipped coffee, heads buried in newspapers. Erika ordered coffee, fresh orange juice and blueberry pancakes. *I'll have what you're having*, said Kei.

The coffees arrived, and the tension began to dissolve. Erika settled back into her chair, cup in hand. People everywhere. They were protected. She managed a tight smile. *So! Is there anything you'd especially like to do in town?* The Japanese was tripping off her tongue more easily, at least.

I have to shop for omiage. Fortnum & Mason would be good. Tea would be a perfect gift.

Don't they get tea all the time?

It's English tea. People like the nice packaging. Those little tins are light and easy to pack.

Isn't there something you'd enjoy doing that's for you, instead of something you feel obliged to do?

It's a nuisance, but it has to be done.

Those gift packs aren't cheap. Erika drained the last of her coffee. She needed to order another. *You're paying for the packaging.*

It's the gesture that counts.

Their food arrived. Erika poured maple syrup over her pancakes. *We'll go to Fortnum's and perhaps the Royal Academy afterwards. What about a Dim Sum lunch in Chinatown?*

That sounds fine.

The noise of the diner pressed back in on them as they ate. Conversations flowed thick and fast. So many languages.

What would happen if you didn't buy omiage for anybody except just Kou-chan, Mayumi-san and the kids? And close friends? Erika took a huge forkful of her pancake, dripping maple syrup on her chin.

Kei's lips tightened. *It would be unacceptable.*

But buying presents for people you hardly know. Haven't you come to London to enjoy yourself? Oh, she wished she could bite off her tongue.

Kei dabbed her lips with her napkin. *I'm only going Fortnum & Mason, and then it's finished. And I like going to Fortnum & Mason.*

Erika concentrated on piling blueberries onto her next forkful. They kept rolling off.

Still the same Erika, said Kei, stabbing a single blueberry onto her fork.

Meaning?

Oh, you know. A bit thoughtless.

Erika wiped syrup off her chin.

It's not your fault, Kei continued. *You're not Japanese, so you don't understand the importance of fulfilling obligations in Japan.*

Kei, I understand about omiage. And I am Japanese.

Half Japanese.

I know. But you said I'm 'not Japanese'.

Well, you're not.

What?

Hafu is not Japanese. It's half Japanese.

Oh, for fuck's sake. Erika lapsed momentarily into English. She closed her eyes, inhaled, counted to ten.

What's the matter? asked Kei.

Erika opened her eyes. *Maybe my non-Japanese half gives me a little perspective. Why do you have to buy presents for people you don't care about? Shouldn't you buy presents because you care about the people you're buying them for? Isn't it a bit manipulative?*

What you say demonstrates precisely why you are not Japanese. It doesn't matter. Buying omiage is important to me.

Erika waved the waitress over. *Another latte, please. Kei?*

No, thank you.

The buzz of the café pressed in on them again. When the waitress brought her coffee Erika plopped two cubes of raw sugar into her cup. She needed the extra kick this morning. She stirred hard, spilling coffee into her saucer.

We have to maintain good relationships with those people, said Kei. It's important for the business, especially these days. Omiage is part of that. She aligned her knife and fork together on the plate. Most of her pancake remained uneaten.

Erika was surprised her appetite was back, despite the tension. She mopped up the remnants of maple syrup with the last piece of pancake, dropped her fork to the plate with a clatter, and sat back kneading her neck. *So Kei, you'll have to think of things you'd like to do in London, besides going to Fortnum & Mason. Especially on days I have to work.*

Well, there was something I came here for, Erika, but it's not going to happen, is it, because you didn't take care of your obligation.

Erika felt the pancake solidifying as it made its way down to her stomach. She washed it down with the last of her orange juice. Her eyes prickled. She slammed her glass back on to the table. *Goddammit!*

Kei jumped.

There's a lot you can do in two weeks. I could suggest, she waved her hands in mock cheeriness, *watching the Changing of the Guard. The British Museum. The Tower of London. The Tate Modern. A Thames boat ride.* Her voice crept up an octave. The Spaniards next to

them stopped talking. *Oh! And of course, you love to shop! Selfridges, Covent Garden, Harrods, Harvey Nichols, John Lewis! And visits to the countryside: Oxford, Henley, Windsor Castle...!*

Erika, you're shouting.

Erika swigged from her latte glass, but it was empty. She squashed a stray blueberry as she put it back down on the table. *Kei, you're here for two whole weeks.*

There was a long pause while Kei stared at her. The Spaniards started up conversation again. The couple next to them read on, oblivious.

Actually, said Kei, giving her a strange look. It was irritation perhaps, or surprise. Maybe even confusion. She cleared her throat. *I think I'd like to see the Changing of the Guard.*

The first day could have gone worse. As they walked along Portobello Road towards Notting Hill Gate station, stopping at shops and market stalls, the tension from breakfast began to fade.

Erika caught herself watching Kei — as she talked in broken English to stallholders, as she photographed the organ grinder on Portobello Road with her pramful of Pomeranians — and seeing her in a new way. She was the closest thing she had to family. It was strange to think they had the same blood running through their veins, that when they were children they had been like sisters. Sarah often complained about hers, with whom she fought often. Yet it was obvious they shared an intense bond. When Meg and her partner broke up, Sarah took her in for several weeks, sitting for long hours listening to her woes over endless cups of tea, Hobnobs and boxes of tissue. When Sarah's decision to be a single mum after a one-night stand had resulted in Luca, Meg had been by her side through the morning sickness and mood swings, the sleepless nights and the labour. Erika found this concept of closeness to

someone with shared blood, the reciprocation of love born out of that blood, curious and miraculous. She wondered what it might be like to have someone like that in her life.

As Kei took in the city, Erika began to see her more clearly. She wondered if Kei saw her in the same way. They were both out of context. Erika lived easily here, an outsider, a *gaijin* in a London full of outsider-*gaijins* — not many people truly belonged here any more, but London was her home. She was fluent in the city. In Tokyo — where Kei filled the place set aside for her with business-like confidence, playing out her role in the family and its trade — Erika bumbled along like a child.

As they drifted about that late summer's day, Erika felt Kei's intense focus on her wrongness begin to dissipate. Kei seemed more vulnerable, and Erika was astonished to feel sudden moments of tenderness, a need rising within her to protect her cousin from the dirt and aggression of London. She wondered if this was how one sister might feel for another.

When Archie called to ask how things were going, they had just walked out of the Royal Academy.

You sound chirpy. He sounded surprised.

Yeah, she wandered away from her cousin, covering her mouth as she spoke into her mobile though Kei was unlikely to understand much. *Could be worse. I'm glad you're coming over tonight though. The two of us shouldn't be alone together too often.*

Glad to be of service.

She laughed. *You know what I mean.*

What do you want me to bring? Wine and a flak jacket?

Flowers for Kei might be nice. She'd like that.

Later that afternoon they climbed the stairs to Erika's flat laden with Kei's shopping and the groceries for that evening's dinner. Kei needed a nap to temper her jet lag. Erika looked forward to having time alone so she could gather herself in again. The day had gone so much

better than she had feared. She found herself excited about being able to introduce Archie to her cousin that evening. It would be the first time Archie had met anyone she was related to.

The faint scent of woody incense from last night still hung in the air. Erika had almost forgotten. She dropped her bags and hurried to open the windows, avoiding Kei's gaze as she retrieved her bags and carried them into the kitchen.

Kei stood in the kitchen doorway, as she had the night before. *I won't sleep long. Just enough so I can stay awake this evening.*

Do you want me to wake you? asked Erika, sliding a carton of eggs into the fridge.

I've got an alarm clock. said Kei. *Just half an hour. Then I can help you prepare dinner.*

Sleep longer, if you like. Erika stopped putting the groceries away and drew back her shoulders.

Any longer and I'll struggle to wake up. There was a softness in Kei's voice, as if she were smiling.

Erika forced herself to look. Yes, she was smiling. *Okay.* She smiled back. *Sleep well.*

Once everything was put away, she put on her apron and began her rituals. First, out came the chopping board. On it, she laid the large knife that had been her mother's. Unwrapping a wide fillet of coral pink salmon from the fishmonger's, she admired its oily gleam; skinned and deboned it, washed it under the tap, patted it dry with kitchen paper and buried it in a stainless steel dish filled with sea salt, brown sugar and dill. Then it went into the fridge. She would be all right.

Cooking kept her mind occupied. It stopped her from doing, thinking and saying dangerous things. Erika poured herself into the creation of something she could arrange on a plate and present to someone. It was a way to make a part of herself solid, to feed this part of herself to someone it hurt her to be too close to. She loved, more than anything, to see people eating what she'd cooked, although there wasn't much opportunity for that at the restaurant.

That was why she liked to sit with Mrs Mackenzie, watching as she enjoyed the bowls of soups and casseroles she'd cooked. She loved to watch people's expressions, the movement of their mouths as they chewed. They didn't know they were taking in this part of herself, her offering. This was how she stayed safe.

She looked forward to feeding Kei. Semi-cured salmon carpaccio with crushed new potatoes in caper butter and a side of soused carrot and courgette ribbons. It was a dish her mother had loved, and she wanted Kei to love it too.

Kei's half an hour was almost up. Putting aside the knife, Erika washed her hands and put on the kettle. She fetched a small teapot and put it on a little tray with a cup and saucer and a tiny jug of milk. No sugar, she knew. As she placed a single piece of her *matcha* green tea shortbread on the saucer she heard the trill of Kei's alarm clock.

She knocked on Kei's door.

Kei's voice was thick with sleep. *Come in*, she croaked. She was sitting up in the bed. There were pillow marks on her face and she rubbed her eyes, like a child. *Wow, I'm so sleepy.*

Erika put the tray on her bedside table. *I've got a bottle of bubbly chilling. We'll open it once you're ready.*

The sun had disappeared behind clouds and the living room was dark and chilly. Erika drew the curtains, turning on the lamps and lighting some candles. She set the table. The smell of incense had faded. She put on a Keith Jarrett CD. The candlelight reflected in the wineglasses, giving the folded white linen napkins a chalky glow. She had arranged creamy lilies on the table. Together with the music, it was soothing, like a spoonful of milk of magnesia. She drank it in, standing at the table, breathing slow, trying to hold still so nothing would change. Then she heard Kei coming out of her room and took refuge once again in the kitchen, burying herself in the preparation of food for her cousin and her lover.

Here, Kei said, standing in the doorway, holding the tea tray, *where can I put this?*

Erika's mouth dropped open, eyes wide. Her cousin was transformed. What she had on was simple, but not anything she would ever have imagined Kei wearing.

Do I look all right? she asked. She wore a trace of eyeliner, a smudge of dark red lipstick, and a crisp white shirt unbuttoned to allow a single pearl on a gold chain to glisten through the shadows. Beneath this she had on a pair of tight-fitting dark blue Levis which revealed the figure that usually hid under her conservative skirts. *It looks odd, doesn't it, without shoes. I'd wear boots with these if I were going out,* she said, wriggling her toes inside her white socks.

You look perfect, said Erika, wondering. The saucepan lid was clattering. She came to and removed it; steam billowed.

What are you making? asked Kei.

Oh, this and that. Erika took a frosty bottle out of the fridge. *Would you like some? I'm definitely ready for a glass or two.* Erika twisted the cork and bottle in opposite directions and Kei shrank back into the doorway. Erika laughed. *Don't worry, I won't let it pop!* The bottle sighed. Erika half-filled two flutes. *English bubbles,* she said.

English! said Kei, and laughed.

Don't say it like that, it's not as silly as it sounds. Taste it. Erika passed a glass to Kei and watched her drink. She was transfixed. Her cousin was so extraordinarily alluring. Seeing this facet of her she hadn't known existed confused her. Kei tilted her head back as she drank and Erika saw the crimson of her lips through the pale bubbles in the glass; saw how they left a smear of lipstick. She watched Kei savouring, thoughtful, licking her lips. Erika felt her eyes sting. Something was welling up in her and her chest tightened. It was not an unpleasant sensation, but she was afraid of keeping it unchecked. She whirled back to her chopping board, wiped her eyes, searched for something to busy herself with. She picked up the knife.

You're right, said Kei. It really is delicious. I'm surprised.

The earth the vines grow in is the same as in Champagne, said Erika, still dazzled. It's the same geological structure that runs under the Channel and comes up the other side in England.

Really. Kei stared at Erika, sipping. I'm very impressed.

Erika blushed. It's what we serve at the restaurant...the sommelier tells us about the wines we sell...that's all...I don't know...anything... She drained the potatoes into a colander, dropping the saucepan lid into the sink and making herself jump. Look, I'd better get on with cooking. Archie will be here soon. Make yourself comfortable in the sitting room. Here, take these. Erika held out bowls of green olives and Parmesan crisps.

Kei from this morning, Kei now. It was someone else, that Kei, from this one. It was too much to comprehend. Erika needed to get back to the safety of cooking. Something easy to deal with, something clear cut. She began stripping ribbons out of a pile of carrots and courgettes with a vegetable peeler and jumped at the sound of the door buzzer.

Could you get that for me? I'll be there in a minute. She emptied her glass, refilled it. She poured some into a fresh glass. She wandered to the living room, a glass in each hand and the bottle tucked under her arm.

Kei held out her empty glass and shifted from foot to foot as Erika poured. She took a large swig and straightened her shirt. *Do I look ok?* she asked again. *He doesn't speak any Japanese, does he? Will you be much longer in the kitchen? It's just that...you know, my English isn't good.*

Don't be nervous! Archie's lovely.

Kei gulped from her glass, then sat back down on the edge of the sofa, legs together. *I wouldn't have thought you'd get nervous about something like this.* Erika stood over her.

I'm not nervous.

You get by just fine in English, I've heard you. He's easy going. You'll like him.

It depends what you've told him about me. Kei ducked her mouth onto the glass, as if she were trying to push the words back in. Her cheeks glowed red and her eyes glistened. She was already a little drunk.

Erika opened the door as Archie reached the top landing. They kissed, and she was aware of Kei standing behind them as they remained locked together. Peeling away, she introduced him to her cousin.

Kei raised one stiff arm, hand outstretched, the other by her side. *I am very pleased to meeting you.* She bobbed her head. *My name is Kei.*

Archie bowed low. *Hajimemashite. Pleased to meet you.*

Your Japanese very good, laughed Kei. She turned to Erika, switching to Japanese. *You taught him well.*

For you. Archie handed her the bunch of sunflowers he had in his hand. *Dōzo.*

Kei flushed and beamed. *Thank you very much.*

Please, sit. Archie gestured at the sofa. He took the bottle out of its cooler. *May I pour you some more?*

Dinner was almost ready. Erika took the knife she had just sharpened, and cut paper-thin slices from the salmon fillet she'd unearthed from its marinade. She furrowed her brow in concentration as she arranged the slices on plates like petals on a camellia.

Archie appeared, leaning against the doorframe. *So?* he asked.

Actually, it hasn't been too awful. She's not as difficult as I remembered. At least, not since this morning.

The sharp knife had allowed her to cut the salmon to such thinness that the dill fronds she'd arranged beneath them glowed green through the rosy pink. She scattered drops of mustard dill dressing and olive oil across each plate, tucking nasturtium, garlic flowers and small curls of purple cress here and there. She stood back to admire the effect. *There.* She wiped her hands. *I'll do the soup if you can help me carry this out.*

Beautiful, said Archie. He kissed the top of her head. *The food doesn't look too bad either.*

Erika rolled her eyes. *Give me a break.* But she reached out to stroke the nape of his neck.

You know, said Archie, *your cousin's completely different to how I imagined her. Not quite as severe. Not as prim. She's pretty hot, actually.*

I know. I don't know. She keeps taking me by surprise. Sometimes I feel relaxed with her. But then she changes just like that. I don't know where I am with her, you know? She kept her voice low. Just in case.

Well, you seem remarkably okay. It's natural you'd feel weird with her.

Mm.

She must feel strange, too.

I suppose so. She makes me feel...I don't know. It's like I'm dealing with a shapeshifter.

Maybe she's a bit like you, he said.

Erika took a pan of Vichyssoise out of the fridge and ladled portions into cut glass bowls, flecking each with chives. She handed two bowls to Archie without looking at him.

The food's so pretty, said Kei. *Oh! Soused vegetables!*

I remembered you like them, said Erika. She turned to Archie. She was going to have to get used to interpreting. *She's happy about the vegetables. She always asked for them whenever she came to stay with Michiko and me.*

What did you just say to him? asked Kei, swaying a little.

Oh, just explaining how you like the soused vegetables. Itadakimasu.

Itadakimasu.

What was that? asked Archie. *Itada—what?*

It means, please to enjoying your meal, said Kei, and giggled. Her lipstick had smudged.

It literally means: I receive, said Erika. An expression of gratitude. You say it before you start eating, like bon appetit.

Ita-maki-daa... said Archie. Kei fell about laughing.

How do I say it again?

Itadakimasu.

Ika-da-ma-saaaa... He kept repeating it, bugging his eyes as he bungled it each time, making more and more preposterous versions of the word. Imakapasataaa...

Erika threw her head back and joined in with Kei's laughter.

Ipapamapapaaaa....

He was doing it on purpose, to dissipate the unease papered over by the layer of conviviality. Erika watched her lover and her cousin, laughing and joking, eating the food she had prepared for them. They were the two people who were supposed to be closest to her. She wasn't sure, though, whether what she felt was fear or whether it was love.

Dai Goshō

*

Oh...Aya-chan! Wasn't he the most handsome man you ever saw? Wasn't he an absolute dream? Reiko clutched the movie program to her chest. They'd emerged, blinking, from the old Shibuya picture house, and were standing at the vast new pedestrian crossing.

Mm. Michiko closed her eyes to keep the magic in just a little longer.

Imagine what it would be like to have a husband like Rock Hudson.

Rei-chan, you'd have to look like Doris Day to be his wife, with a high nose and big eyes. And blonde hair. And long legs.

She wore the most beautiful clothes.

All those expensive jewels, too, said Michiko. She looked down at her two-toned shoes and bobby socks peeping out from beneath her petticoat-flounced skirt. She had saved every *sen* from working in the family shop to get those shoes. It had taken nearly two years. Her mother had secretly given her a little extra at the New Year so she could get them sooner. The day she bought them she was sure she was the happiest she'd ever been; she kept peeking in the box to stroke and sniff the new leather, untying and retying the laces. The fabric for the skirt and petticoat was from Nishioka's store, payment in kind for babysitting Nishioka-san's granddaughter a few times a month for over a year. She copied a pattern from a borrowed magazine onto old newspaper and sat up late each night, sewing while her father was asleep so he wouldn't shout at her for wasting time on fripperies.

She wore this outfit whenever she went to the pictures. The rest of the time the skirt, petticoat and bobby socks were folded in clean tissue paper and kept in a box on her shelf in the cupboard. She regularly took her shoes out for a polish, and just to look at them. She lived for the pictures, saved her money to go once a month with Reiko and enjoy a milk shake

at Fujiya's afterwards. *Pillow Talk* was the most glorious movie she'd seen yet. Doris Day was so pretty and glamorous. Looking down now, her outfit looked tired and unsophisticated.

This skirt's so boring. I look so boring.

Don't be silly Aya-chan, you're beautiful.

I only have this one skirt.

It's a lovely skirt. I only have this one dress.

It has such a gorgeous pattern though. My skirt's so plain.

What's the matter all of a sudden? Why the glum face?

Michiko scuffed at the pavement with her toe and scowled. *I wish I were an American girl.*

Michiko! What if somebody hears you?

I don't care.

You can't say that.

Why not? Why can't I say that?

Because. You know why. Imagine what your father would say.

I don't care what he says. It's not fair. American girls have everything. They have all the clothes and shoes they want. They get to ride around in huge big cars. Look at the space they have in their enormous houses – every girl has her own room and a great big bed to sleep in. Imagine not having to share! They get to go to college. They don't have to work their fingers raw every day. And when they get married they have servants to clean and cook and take care of the children while they go shopping and play tennis and go to parties. Their husbands are handsome and kind and bring them presents. Jewels and flowers. Why wouldn't any girl want that? You're not going to get that if you're a Japanese girl. American girls are so lucky.

I bet not every American lives like that, said Reiko.

They do. It's called 'The American Dream'. I read about it in a magazine.

Really?

Yes. I wish I were an American girl.

Stop saying that. Americans were our enemy.

They're not any more. Not really. Look how they're helping us.

Look how they bombed our houses. Look what they did to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

People are still suffering and dying there every day because of it, you know that.

The crossing lights changed but they stayed where they were, frowning at one another. Then Reiko nudged Michiko with her elbow and grinned.

Hey, you'd be a gaijin. You wouldn't want to be gaijin, surely? All dirty and strange with a big nose. You saw how Doris Day sat in the bath in all her dirty soapy water. Yuck.

The audience had laughed when they saw Doris Day washing herself *inside* the bath. It was revolting, but not enough to dim the glorious shine of the movie. Reiko linked arms with Michiko and patted her hand.

Oh Aya, let's not spoil our mood. The movie was such a dream. Come on, let's go to Fujiya's. Let's talk about the movie – here, you have the movie program first. Give it back to me next week and we can take turns with it. You can look at the pictures and imagine yourself being a gaijin, sitting in yucky bathwater with all your jewels on.

And married to Rock Hudson.

They giggled and made their way across the zebra crossing. Sitting at their table at Fujiya's, drinking pink strawberry milk shakes out of tall glasses, they talked for hours about the movie, about which of the boys at school they liked, about the dress Reiko was about to start making and Michiko laughed and chattered as if nothing had darkened her mood.

She floated home, her head filled with ruby necklaces, fur coats and satin pillows. That evening she squatted over the *hibachi* in the back kitchen, fanning the charcoal as the salted mackerel bubbled and browned over it, humming the theme tune to *Pillow Talk*. She dreamed her way through dinner, imagining herself sitting on a chair at a dining table, eating off a fine china plate with a golden fork. She skipped with the dirty dishes into the kitchen and stood around the sink with her mother and sister as they cleared up after the evening

meal. They chattered on without noticing that Michiko wasn't joining in the conversation. Even her father shouting at her for taking too long to bring him his tea didn't break her out of her golden cocoon.

What's the matter with you girl! You're half asleep! I hope you weren't half asleep when you made the tea!

No father, I made it properly. I'm sorry you had to wait. She laid out his newspaper in front of him and poured him his tea before helping her mother with the darning. Only once the plates had been put away and the rice washed and put to soak for next morning's breakfast, once she had laid the family's *futon* out for the night and lit the fire under the bath in readiness for her father, who bathed first, did she notice once again the shabby walls, the worn *tatami* matting, the threadbare blankets. She didn't dare look at the movie program while her father was still awake. She hummed a Doris Day tune as she darned, keeping herself busy until it was her turn for her bath. As the youngest, she was always last to bathe. She could not yet imagine herself washing in dirty water, as Doris had done. Even so, as she sank into the deep old wooden tub she saw instead a long shallow one, glistening with tiles and framed with golden taps, filled to the rim with bubbles. As she crept into her *futon* in the dark she imagined herself sinking into soft satin sheets, Rock Hudson at the end of the phone line. For a long time she lay awake, listening to her father's snores. She felt the darkness envelop her, blotting out the glorious technicolour images she'd held onto throughout the day. She felt it swirl about her and creep into her core. When she finally drifted to sleep, she took with her a fathomless hole that had been created deep inside her. She slept deeply, and did not dream.

A Rice Bowl

Hand thrown in rustic style, the chunky thickness of the bowl contrasts with its smooth, creamy glaze. Beneath this glaze — which renders it a soft and dusky blue — a simple pattern of curlicues, like snail-shell spirals, inside which gentle dots are corralled. It is possible to see how each of these marks was made by the point of a brush, wielded by the artisan. The dots are all even in size, but here and there, tiny traces of a darker blue show the point of pressure created by the movement of the artisan's brush. The bowl is a hollow hemisphere, not the conical shape more traditionally favoured. It is not too large, and has a pleasing weight in the hand. On its base, the artisan has inscribed a single character, his identifier. The bowl has had decades of use and as is usual, has only ever had one owner at a time. Only rice was eaten from it, and always by the one who owned it.

“Hansei, Owabi, Jihi”

Contrition, remorse, mercy

*

The sky hung dark and low so she could no longer see the stars. It was not night but blackness clung to her. Sea spray on her face trickled into her eyes, stinging, blinding. Flailing about for something to hold onto, she found nothing. She gripped with her toes but it was not enough to steady herself. Falling to her knees as the deck beneath her bucked and rolled, she was afraid she would be thrown into the ocean and lost. Laying flat on her stomach, she clung to the deck, heart racing, sick. She could not tell whether the surging waves were those of the sea or whether they were inside her.

Sensing a presence overhead, she turned on her back and saw a great bird. Its white plumage flashed such dazzling white against the black of the sky that when she closed her eyes, she could see its imprint on the inside of her lids, like the afterglow of lightning. When she opened them again she saw it hovering quietly above as if it hardly noticed the storm raging around it, its wings spread wide, its delicate legs trailing behind. Its eye was upon her, observing her. The bird was trying to communicate with her. She tried to quieten the waves heaving inside her so she could understand; did not dare blink or avert her eyes, in case she missed any sign that might help her comprehend, but still, she could not. In frustration she called out. It hovered above a while longer, then dipped lower, almost touching her. It kept its calm gaze fixed upon her. And then it flew up and away into the darkness.

An urgent nausea pushed her awake.

Erika made it to the bathroom just in time. She vomited twice, three times until her stomach had emptied, and still she retched. She flushed the toilet and curled into a ball at the foot of the pedestal, cooling her head on the tiles. The floor still rocked under her. The vomiting brought no relief.

She heard the door open.

Have you just been sick? Archie's voice was muffled with sleep. He knelt beside her, stroking her back. *Do you want some water?*

Unhunh.

He rinsed a facecloth under the tap, wrung it out, filled a glass with water. *Here, take a sip of this.*

She sat up to drink, groaned, curled back onto the floor.

He wiped her face. *Any better?*

No. Still feel sick.

Poor thing. He remained crouched beside her, soothing her back with his hands, their warmth seeping into her on one side, the chill of the tiles spreading into her from the other. *What do you think's brought this on?* he asked.

Maybe dinner last night. You ok?

Absolutely fine.

Kei alright?

No sign she's awake.

Good.

He continued smoothing, stroking her back. The nausea rose again.

Gonna be sick. She heaved, vomiting up the water she had just drunk, remained crumpled over the toilet. Retched again, bile burning her throat. She slumped back to the floor.

Leave me here.

I can't go back to sleep with you lying on the bathroom floor.

Yes you can. Leave me here.

Honey...

I'll come back to bed later.

Archie rolled up a towel and slid it under her head. *Sure?*

Mmhh.

Just shout if you need me.

The cold solidity of the bathroom floor reassured her. She drifted in and out of sleep, pushing herself up between feverish, restless dreams to retch. She dreamed of the sea again; she was out under the stars now, so cold, and there on the deck of the boat where she lay, Kei came to her, rising out of the sea, bending over without a word to gaze into her face — not unkindly — before disappearing back into the waves. Later, she thought she saw the figure of her mother at the helm of the boat. She did not see her face, which was turned away as she peered at the horizon. Her back was solid and still. Both of her hands were on the wheel as she steered through the waves.

Erika crept back to bed at dawn. In the half-light Archie lay on his back, mouth open, arms splayed. She moved slowly so as not to wake him, feeling the relief as she stretched out her body on the soft mattress after the long night spent curled and contracting on a cold hard floor. She dozed, then woke with a knock at the door.

It's me Eri-chan. Can I come in?

Archie was gone. She looked at the clock. It was past eleven. She hadn't heard Kei call her *Eri-chan* in years.

Sure. She pushed herself up against the pillows.

Kei came in with a tray, rice and tea bowls clinking, and set it down on the bed. *Archie told me you were ill in the night. He says he'll phone you later.* She stood beside the bed, making no move to leave.

I don't think I can go out with you today. I have to recover in time for work tomorrow. Erika mumbled, curled in foetal position.

Kei laid her hand on Erika's forehead. *You don't have a fever,* she said. *What made you sick? It can't be something you've eaten, because we've both eaten the same things, and I'm fine.*

Erika pulled the duvet over her head.

You're not pregnant, are you?

Erika snorted. *Absolutely not.* Her cousin's presence irritated her. *I have my period. This very minute. You want me to show you?*

Why are you so angry?

Erika didn't know. Her eyes burned, the bowls, teapot and cup on the tray blurring and blending into shimmering patterns. She blinked and scrubbed her face hard with her palms so Kei would not see her tears.

I made okayu for you, said Kei. I hope you don't mind, I found my way round your cupboards and drawers. I don't know if this is your rice bowl and chopsticks, I just picked the nicest ones. There was umeboshi too. That'll help settle your stomach.

The tray was laid with a napkin to one side and a small teapot and cup on the other. Kei had chosen the correct chopsticks; plain, made of *hinoki* cedar, Erika's own. The rice bowl on the tray had been her mother's. Its rustically hand-thrown porcelain was thick and comforting. A soft clear glaze covered brush-point dot patterns the colour of the sea where it moves from shallow to deep. It was a set pair with her own, which was the same size and shape and similarly glazed, but girdled with a muted blue and dark red stripe. Her mother had bought both of them from a small ceramic shop in downtown Tokyo more than twenty years ago.

The wrinkled dusky pink of the pickled *umeboshi* plum sat in the centre of the steaming *okayu* rice porridge, a washed-out, shrunken rising sun. It was the only thing Erika could have faced eating at that moment; a dish eaten in illness and convalescence. Someone else, someone who knows what's needed and how to do it, has to make it for you. She had not eaten *okayu* since her mother died, because there had no longer been anyone to make it for her, until now.

Erika rolled over to look at Kei. *I've always had problems with my stomach.* She rubbed her face again. *I often get sick when I'm stressed. Thanks for the okayu. I'll eat it in a minute. Do you mind leaving me for a while?*

She reached for the tray and slid it onto the bedside table, holding her breath, and as soon as the door closed she curled into a ball under the sheets, put a pillow over her head, covering her mouth tight with her hand. In silence, she wept. And then, she slept again, and did not dream.

It's such a relief, not feeling sick any more. Erika spread butter and Marmite on toast. Kei sat at the kitchen table drinking tea.

You should be eating something easier to digest, said Kei. *Butter's too rich after an upset stomach.*

If you've never been sick then you won't know how wonderful it is to be healthy. Erika added another smear to her already dripping toast. *Applies to all bad things in life. People who've never had anything terrible happen to them can't see how happy they are.*

Are there such people?

Of course. I know some.

Everyone suffers in one way or another, Eri. You shouldn't make assumptions, said Kei. *People have secrets.*

They went for a walk in Kensington Gardens. It was a Saturday and the park was filled with families playing ball games and racing toy boats on the lake. The leaves were starting to turn auburn and though the trees were bathed in late afternoon sun, Erika tightened her blue check cotton scarf around her neck against the faint chill. She caught Kei staring at it.

You've seen this before, on Michiko, said Erika.

It suits you.

It still smells of her perfume. Opium.

You've not washed it? Kei looked horrified.

I haven't worn it since... I just felt like wearing it today.

On the far side of the boating lake, a child wearing a t-shirt with a glittery unicorn on it was trying to fly a kite. She ran with it until it was airborne, but as soon as she stopped and turned to tug its string to haul it up into the sky, it swooped back down to earth, a felled bird.

Do you mind if we go back? Erika said. *I'm exhausted.*

Erika wanted to order takeaway but Kei insisted on cooking. She made up a pot of *ojiya* porridge, mixing barley *miso*, shredded ginger and chopped spring onion into rice gruel and whisking in a couple of eggs, leaving tendril trails of white and gold. *This will be easy on the stomach*, she said.

They sat on the sofa slurping from steaming bowls with ceramic spoons, watching a comedy show. Despite the laughter and noise from the TV, the room felt shrouded in silence. Perhaps it was because Erika knew Kei couldn't understand most of it. She turned to her cousin. *It's rude of me. Comedy's hard to get when it's not your own language.* She picked up the remote.

No, don't switch it off. It's good for me to hear English. I'll get us more ojiya. Kei rose from the sofa, picking up the empty bowls. *We can talk later, when the program's finished.*

Erika watched the screen but no longer felt engaged with the show. Maybe Kei just meant talking generally. Talking about Tokyo, about what she wanted to do tomorrow, about life. Just generally. She tried to focus.

Kei returned with refilled bowls. *Here you go.*

Erika scooped a fresh spoonful into her mouth and burned her tongue. *Ow, hot.* She spat the mouthful back into the bowl.

I heated it up again, I should have told you. Are you all right?

Yeah, no problem. Thanks. It felt pointless to continue watching the show but she remained glued to the screen until the credits rolled.

How's your stomach? Kei raised her voice above the louder volume of the adverts.

Better. The ojiya was delicious, just what I needed. There was no choice but to turn off the TV. The screen fizzed black and left a void. Erika jumped up and collected their empty bowls. *I'll make some tea.*

Washing up in the kitchen, Erika thought of a creature she remembered from a children's book with a head at either end, each pushing and pulling in opposite directions, having to negotiate where they were headed next. A Push-Me-Pull-You. This was how it was with Kei. They were taking turns to concede and assert, concede and assert in an elaborate dance. Kei had taken care of her and now it was Erika's turn to concede. She returned to the sitting room, resolute.

Ok. Let's talk.

Kei looked up, surprised. She took her teacup. *What about?*

Erika faltered, flushed. *I thought you wanted to talk about something particular...you know...about...* Kei waited. Erika forced the words out. She may as well get it over and done with. *You know, what's on the altar. The remains.*

Silence.

Come on, help me here, thought Erika. Just give me the scolding you want to give me, get it done with. Instead she said: *I did try to find a place to inter them.*

Did you?

There's only one Sōtō Zen temple in the whole of the UK. It's in Northumberland.

Where's that? asked Kei.

In the far north, not far from the Scottish border. It's a place famous for a big ancient wall. Hadrian's Wall.

Did you go there?

I went there once, a long time ago, with Michiko and Julian. Not to the temple, but to see the wall. It's impressive. The Romans built it as a kind of border. It goes on for miles across these wild, beautiful moors. When we were there it was a cold and grey misty day, I remember it well. Michiko hated it. She kept telling Julian she'd had enough, she was cold,

she wanted to go to the pub and have a drink and sit by the fire. She said it made her feel lonely up there. That it was too desolate.

And you felt she wouldn't want her grave there.

It's so far from anywhere. And it would have been hard for me to tend to it. A whole day's travel, there and back. There isn't anyone but me here for her now, and I might not even stay in the UK. If I left, who would look after her grave? It would become meaningless.

It could never be meaningless.

With nobody attached to it, it would be meaningless. And lonely. I'm not going to have kids, so the meaning would die with me.

You sound very sure about not having children.

I won't.

Life changes in ways you'd never expect, Eri. You still have time.

Believe me. I won't, said Erika. But she was encouraged by a gentleness in her cousin's voice. But do you understand? About the grave, I mean.

I think so.

Now that the broach had occurred it was easier to continue. Something tightly wound inside loosened a little. In this country, people often have their ashes scattered in the ground, somewhere beautiful, like the mountains or the sea.

That's not appropriate. Auntie wouldn't like it.

The idea of scattered ashes creeped her out. So no, she wouldn't like it. Although I suppose since she's dead, it doesn't matter, really. Come to think of it, being in a grave in Northumberland's not going to bother her either. So I guess it's about how I feel.

Scattering her ashes would be unacceptable to the temple. Remember how we had to get dispensation from them just to let you have some of the cremated bones? That was the only way you were allowed to take some away with you.

Sometimes I wish I'd left all her bones in the family grave, said Erika. Then I wouldn't have had this problem. But your father took pity on me, said I could have some of them so that I wouldn't be lonely.

But it was on condition that you interred them.

Yes. But can't you see how I don't know what to do? I thought maybe I should wait until I die. Then I'd have my own ashes mixed with hers.

That's not a good idea, Eri.

But there's no home temple here, nobody cares.

I care.

What do you care if some of my mother's bones are in an urn, here, with me, in England! She felt her breath quicken. What difference does it make to you? She stood up. Can we stop talking about this now?

Eri.

She felt her cousin's hand on her arm.

Eri, this isn't good for you.

I have to think about a shopping list for Mrs Mackenzie.

I've noticed...a darkness about you. More than when we last met. And I think it's because you're not dealing with it. It's been a long time since Auntie Michiko died. It's not just about doing the right thing by the family, or by tradition, or even by Auntie. It's about you. Until you deal with those bones, you aren't letting go. You need to let go. You need to move on.

Erika pulled her arm away. She was starting to feel sick again. I have so much to do. Can I go now?

It was only Monday but there were over seventy covers. Frankie had done his back in and rung in sick; Erika was cut no slack despite her having to take on his sections as well as her own. She endured a drubbing from Chef with perverse pleasure after misreading a docket and plating up two beef instead of three. The humiliation distracted her from the flashes of panic that were cutting through the peculiar, blanketing numbness she'd felt throughout the day. She wasn't going to get home until after midnight, by which time Kei would have gone to bed. Until then, her cousin would be in the flat alone. What at first had been a relief — to be at work, away from Kei — turned to apprehension.

During her break she phoned Archie. *Please could you take Kei out on Wednesday evening until I get back from work?*

You sound desperate.

I can't have her in the flat alone.

She's already seen the urn, what else is there to worry about?

I don't like her alone in the flat while I'm working, that's all.

When Erika got home, the Korean cabinet and everything on it had been dusted. There was a small bunch of white chrysanthemums in a vase. It looked like a proper altar instead of a repository for neglected objects. Closing her eyes and breathing, she willed away the threat of nausea.

There was a bottle of eighteen-year-old Talisker unopened in the cupboard and its cork gave way with a satisfying *blonk*. She poured a finger's width into a glass and settled into an armchair, feet up on the coffee table. It traced a burning path down to her stomach, distracting and soothing.

You're back.

Erika hadn't heard Kei come into the room. *I'm sorry, I woke you.*

Kei squinted in the lamplight and rubbed her eyes. *I couldn't sleep.*

Erika waggled the Talisker at her. *Want some?*

Kei sat opposite her and accepted a glass. Gesturing at the Korean cabinet, she said: *I hope you don't mind.*

Thanks for cleaning it up.

It looks better, doesn't it?

Erika poured herself another dribble of whisky.

Kei spoke as if she had been rehearsing the words. *I know you said you didn't want to talk about it, but that altar, you...*

Did you have a good day? What did you do? Did you make dinner here or go out?

Kei sipped her whisky, her expression morphing into disappointment. *I went to the National Gallery. I bought groceries on the way home and made chāhan for dinner. I made some for you. Are you hungry?*

No. Thanks.

Kei moved over to the cabinet. Her fingers slid over the front of the cabinet and lingered over the metal clasps. *What's inside the cupboards?*

Just stuff.

What sort of stuff?

None of your fucking business, Erika wanted to say. Instead she said: *Michiko's stuff. It's her old cabinet. It's as she left it. I looked through it once, when I got it home after clearing her house. I can't remember what's in there.*

Erika, could you please do something for me?

What?

Could you stop calling Auntie by her first name? It's not right. Could you call her Mother, at least?

It's a habit. She didn't like me calling her that. She made me call her Michiko.

Yes, yes. I know. We all found it strange. But for now, could you just...not? It sounds too odd.

Erika drained the last of her whisky and got up. *I'm off to bed.* Kei looked upset. Erika flushed with guilt, and added: *I'm cleaning and cooking for Mrs Mackenzie tomorrow. You can come up and see her with me in the afternoon, if you want. She wants to meet you. You'll like her.*

Two small fish pies in foil cartons ready for the oven; a Lancashire hotpot; a crock of Scotch broth. Erika decided to bake a Victoria sponge cake to have with their tea. Good and old-fashioned with raspberry jam in the middle, a dusting of icing on top. The vegetables were washed, chopped and bagged up ready for the microwave. Kei had gone clothes shopping in Kensington High Street; the flat felt light again. Erika could return to herself, breathe, better channel her care into the food she was cooking. It was all ready by ten o'clock. Erika's repertoire for Mrs Mackenzie was limited by request from her elderly neighbour. The curry Erika once made had remained uneaten. *I like my food plain, my dear,* Mrs Mackenzie had said, patting her hand apologetically. So: cottage pie, beef casserole, toad-in-the-hole, the occasional roast chicken. Haggis, neeps and tatties on Burns Night. At Christmas, they ate roast turkey and stuffing together. It made Erika happy to cook such things so that an old woman would feel less lonely.

Four hours to clean her own flat. Erika included the Korean cabinet in her rounds and felt blank as she dusted the box containing the granite urn for her mother's bones. It made a muffled rattle when she moved it and was surprised to feel nothing. She felt more anxiety about the time remaining with Kei.

Eight more days was all; there was today; four at work, and the three she'd be given off for the August Bank Holiday — Carnival weekend. The barriers and Portaloos were already being manoeuvred into place. Erika had invited Sarah, Luca and Archie to stay over on Carnival Sunday and Monday; their presence would dilute any tension. She'd get a copy

of Time Out for Kei and suggest things to do in town on the days she was at work, and ask Archie to take her out in the evenings. Maybe she could cope with eight more days.

Erika didn't hear Kei letting herself in over the sound of hoovering. She jumped when Kei tapped her on the shoulder, smiling, laden with bags. After putting one of them on the table, Kei disappeared into her room before returning to wrest the Hoover from her cousin.

Let me.

No. Give it back. Kei turned to go back to her room and Erika called after her: *I'm almost finished.* She regretted sounding irritable.

The Hoover put away, Erika found Kei reading in her room. *Ready to go upstairs?*

There's something I want you to open first. Kei fetched the red bag from the sitting room and held it out. *Go ahead.*

Erika pulled out a small box and flushed with guilt. It was from a local jeweller.

Don't worry, it's nothing special.

Inside was a necklace with a tiny silver pendant in the shape of an angel. It wasn't the sort of thing Erika usually wore but it was pretty.

I wanted to get you an omamori but since you can't get them here, I thought I'd get you the western equivalent. It's a guardian angel. Here, let me.

Erika felt something inside her come undone. She was glad Kei moved behind her to fasten it; her cousin wouldn't see her eyes glossing with tears. She cleared her throat. *It's lovely. Thank you.*

That was delicious, my dear, said Mrs Mackenzie. Her quavering head was permanently bowed and her stooped back, crooked, but she peeked up from under her snow-white fringe with a girlish smile. *I'll have another slice, if I may.*

I can do, said Kei, reaching for Mrs Mackenzie's plate. She cut another slice of Victoria sponge.

Thank you, darling girl, you are kind. It runs in the family, I see. Her warm Scottish burr wafted comfort.

The cousins sipped their tea as Mrs Mackenzie finished her cake, her fork scattering crumbs. A comfortable silence descended.

Kei got up, perusing the bookshelves before standing in front of an oak sideboard. *Many beautiful thing*, she said.

I'm afraid they're rather tedious for Erika to dust, but I'm rather fond of them, said Mrs Mackenzie. *That's a lifetime of objects on there. They all tell a story.*

Kei was staring at a grey stone statuette about four inches high. *This is Kannon-sama?* She turned to Mrs Mackenzie.

That is a statue of Kuan Eim.

Same, said Erika. *Guan Yin. Goddess of Mercy.*

William brought it back for me from Thailand. He went there for a special reunion a few years before he died. She gestured to Kei. *Would you bring it to me, dear?*

Mrs Mac loved telling stories. Erika hadn't heard this one before; she poured tea and settled back in her chair.

William was a prisoner of war in Kanchanaburi.

Erika heart leapt to her throat. *Kanchanaburi. That's...that's the Burma Railway...*

Yes dear.

Kei brought the statuette to the old woman. Erika glanced at her cousin; it was clear from her expression that nothing had been understood.

He came back a bag of bones. He caught dysentery and malaria while he was in the camp. He carried scars on his back from all the beatings, but it took longer for his spirit to recover than his body. Nightmares, you know. But he would never talk about it. He was one of the lucky ones — at least he came home.

I didn't know... Erika was stricken. You never told me.

Darling girl, you needn't look like that. He died having made peace with it all.

Made peace? Should she be turning this into a conversation?

There was a military interpreter, an extraordinary man, who was so consumed with remorse for having been complicit in the cruel treatment of the prisoners, that after the war was over, he spent the rest of his life trying to make amends. I believe in the end he became a Buddhist monk. It was he that arranged the reunion between the prisoners of war and their tormentors at Kanchanaburi. And William was invited. He didn't want to go, at first. He didn't want to be reminded of that time in his life.

Erika looked over at Kei, who was leaning in with a faint smile, trying to look engaged in the conversation. She still didn't understand what was being discussed.

You needn't tell her, said Mrs Mackenzie, noticing Erika's glance. I don't want her upset. Although I do want her to know I bear no ill feeling towards the Japanese. Neither did William, in the end. The interpreter — he was called Mr Nagase — made it possible for William to forgive. He understood, in the end, that war makes beasts of us all.

Erika could not speak.

He came back from that reunion a changed man. He said he felt released from something that had bound him for all those years. He bought the statuette from a little shop in Kanchanaburi, to remind him, he said, about the healing power of compassion, and forgiveness, and mercy.

Kei was looking at Erika with a puzzled expression. *Why are you crying?* she asked, in Japanese.

Erika shook her head. *I'll tell you later.*

The food put away in the elderly widow's fridge and freezer, the flat tidy and clean, the cousins went to eat at the Sun in Splendour. Sipping a second glass of Grenache, Kei said:
You were going to tell me why you were crying, earlier.

Oh, how to talk about this. *She never told me her husband was a prisoner of war.*

Prisoner of war? Where?

In Thailand. He was one of the ones who helped build the Thai-Burma Railway. Or the Death Railway, some call it.

I know it was a great example of Japanese engineering. I've never heard it called the Death Railway.

It's because thousands of men died building it.

Did they?

Erika peered at her cousin. *You didn't know?*

But Mrs Mackenzie's husband came back alive, didn't he?

That's not the point. He was traumatised. He was probably tortured.

What? By who?

Erika gaped. She'd heard about this, that people didn't know. *What did they teach you about World War Two in school? she asked. About Burma and Thailand and the Allied prisoners of war? About Nanjing? Korea? Okinawa?*

We didn't really study much about that. We learned a few things about the war, mostly about how awful it was for everyone, and about the firebombing of Tokyo, and about the atomic bombs.

In the prison camp, many of the POWs starved to death, died of disease, were worked to death building the railway, were beaten and tortured. By the Japanese.

Tortured? Are you sure?

When Erika had finished recounting Mrs Mackenzie's story, Kei's eyes were full of tears. *I didn't know. I didn't know*, she kept repeating. *They never told us. I've never heard of this Nagase-san.*

Erika was aghast at Kei's reaction. *Mrs Mackenzie didn't want you to be upset.*

Kei dabbed at her eyes. *I knew there were war criminals, and they were tried and executed. There was a girl in my class who was the granddaughter of one of them, and nobody spoke to her or played with her. Not even the teachers wanted to deal with her. I asked my parents what her grandfather had done, and they just told me, 'shameful things' and refused to discuss it. I never knew.*

Erika found herself reaching for her cousin's hand. *Mrs Mackenzie wanted you to know that her husband had no bad feelings towards Japanese people. She doesn't, either; look how she's accepted me into her life. And she likes you very much. That's what the Kannon-sama statuette was about. A reminder about mercy, and compassion, and forgiveness.* Erika couldn't continue. She wept, and now it was Kei's turn to console Erika.

Later that evening, the Talisker had its second outing in two days. Kei and Erika sat rosy-cheeked on the sofa, a bottle of wine and now a good measure of whisky between them. Kei was worn out from crying, but the alcohol relaxed her enough to feel at ease with her cousin for the first time since she'd arrived.

Kei moved over to the Korean Cabinet and lit two sticks of incense. Erika watched as she tinged the brass bell, put her hands together and moved her lips in silent supplication. She went to join her. When they finished, Kei smiled. *Let's offer Auntie some whisky.*

Erika snorted. *Oh yeah, she'd like that.*

Kei didn't pick up on the sarcasm and went to rinse out the offering cup in the kitchen. Chastened, Erika met her with the bottle on her return, and poured a tiny amount into the cup. *At least this won't hurt her now.*

Kei squatted down and opened the top cupboard of the cabinet. *Do you mind if I look inside?*

Whatever. What the hell. *Go ahead.*

Kei pulled out a box. She opened the lid and lifted out a hard brown glasses case; a pair of tiny white lace gloves yellowing at the edges; a cedarwood box about six centimetres wide; a red faux-leather address book with a world map inside its covers and a wooden darning mushroom decorated with painted flowers. At the very bottom was a silver pillbox inscribed with the initials AU, which rattled when Kei shook it. She opened it.

Is this her wedding ring? Oh, and her engagement ring. Sapphires and diamonds. How beautiful.

The undertaker took them off her fingers. She always wore them, even after Julian left her.

What's this for? asked Kei, holding up the wooden mushroom.

For darning.

It's so pretty with its little painted flowers.

She got it when she and Julian went to Norway on honeymoon. I guess she thought it was a good thing for a housewife to have. I never saw her use it.

Darning seems too unglamorous for her. I never thought of Auntie as a housewife, said Kei.

She sure didn't act like one.

What beautiful gloves, said Kei.

She wore them on her wedding day, said Erika. *I don't know why I know that. Michiko must have told me.*

Please, Erika.

I'm sorry. I'll just call her 'my mother'.

Kei opened the small cedarwood box. Inside was a tiny plastic bracelet with a white clasp, pink paper inside. *Underwood, Erika. 3.2kgs. 23 February 1967. Oh, it's your hospital bracelet from when you were born! It's absolutely tiny. She laughed. It only just fits around my little finger, look. How sweet she kept it. I don't think my mother kept mine.*

Erika felt again the same shock she'd felt when she first came upon this after her mother died. It was still unexpected, incomprehensible. She scrubbed at her face with her palms. *I'm tired*, she said. *Feel free to keep looking. Good night.*

The next morning they ate breakfast together, guarding hangovers. Erika was alarmed to see the stack of notebooks and some papers from the cabinet on the table. She was glad Kei had put the rest of the things back in the cabinet; the objects seemed different from the last time she'd looked at them; they bore a new sheen of strangeness. The sight of them had sapped her strength. She didn't know what to do with them. She wished they would disappear so she didn't have to think about them. Maybe she could give them to Kei.

Kei had removed her rings to rub hand cream into her fingers. That was when Erika realised her cousin wasn't wearing her wedding ring. How on earth had she missed that? She was caught off guard when Kei spoke.

Those were her diaries. And some letters. Have you read them? asked Kei.

Not really.

Aren't you curious?

Erika buttered some toast. *Don't you think it's inappropriate?*

If she hadn't wanted them to be read, they would have been destroyed. Especially since she knew when she was...

I don't want to talk about that, Kei. Erika's voice was glassy.

Look, I didn't mean to bring that up. It's about the diaries, really.

Erika bit off a huge hunk of toast and took her time chewing and swallowing. Then she said: *I skimmed through them, but I can't really read them because of the kanji. And what I could read looked pretty banal. It was mostly about the weather, or what she ate, or where she went. They're all short entries, since she only wrote in five-year diaries. You*

know, the ones where you only have a few inches for each day. Not enough space to go into detail.

Even less reason to shy away from reading them. Auntie had such an exotic life. I'd love to read about it.

Erika hadn't expected this of Kei. She didn't need to feel guilty about having tried to read them, after all. *Feel free*, she said.

Really?

Yes.

Do you want me to transcribe the hiragana against the kanji so you can read it more easily?

There's more than thirty years' worth of diaries.

I don't mind, even if it takes a while. I could skim through and pick out entries that look especially interesting. I can start today. If it's okay with you, I can take some of the diaries back with me to Tokyo to work on them. I could post them back to you.

Why would you do this? Erika asked.

I cared a lot about her, you know. She was like my second mother.

Erika suppressed a snort.

I'm sure she meant for you to read them.

This was disorientating. Erika couldn't help but wonder about Kei's true motive. Curiosity, certainly. But was that enough to sustain what would surely be months of transcribing? Didn't she have anything better to do, what with the family business, which was booming despite the recession (*People always need tea*, she'd said), and her husband?

Her husband, Jun. What happened to Jun-san? Why aren't you wearing your wedding ring? The question dried on her lips. Her cousin had avoided her question about Jun when she'd first arrived and hadn't talked about him since. Kei was offering to help with the immense task of transcribing Michiko's diaries into *hiragana*, whatever her motivation. It was not the time to push.

A Lacquer Tablet

It measures five centimetres wide and eight high. Small dots of mother-of-pearl are embedded in its elegant and simply carved legs. It feels feather light and insubstantial in the hand. Hiding an inner core of thin wood, it has been painted over many hundreds of times with smooth red and black lacquer and left to harden to a matt sheen. Its edges are highlighted in thin lines of gold paint, with which an inscription has also been written on the front of the thin panel that rises up from the legs. The script is in Sanskrit. On the reverse, kanji: a surname, name and date etched into the black lacquer to reveal the red underneath. It sits inside a red lacquer cabinet just large enough to hold it. At morning, its doors are opened up and incense offered. At night, the doors must be closed.

“Sugitaru Wa Nao Oyobazaru Ga Gotōshi”

Let what is past flow away downstream

*

The first hint of Carnival on Sunday was the sound of whistles blowing as people began flooding in to the neighbourhood.

It's starting, said Erika. You'll be sick of that sound by Monday night. In the distance, they could hear the boom bass of the procession beginning at the top of Ladbroke Grove. The smell of jerk chicken wafted in through the windows. Sarah and Archie should be here soon. Then we'll go out.

Sarah arrived first. Hello! Kei! I've heard lots about you.

Nice to meet you, said Kei, looking sideways at Erika.

Where's Luca? It's Children's Day today.

Sarah made a guilty face. I know, I know. It's just that I won't be able to relax with him out there in the crush, even if it is Children's Day. He's with Meg. She's taking him to Hamley's. He'd much rather be toy shopping with his auntie than here with me at Carnival. Though I admit, there's another reason, she said, winking, as she pulled a small bag of grass and some papers out of her pocket. She rolled a joint and lit it. Time to get into the spirit of Carnival, she said, passing it to Kei.

No, thank you, said Kei. Is that what I think it is? she asked Erika in Japanese.

Erika took a few tokes and passed it back to Sarah. You should try some.

Isn't it illegal?

Around here it's part of a religion.

Kei laughed, pulling a face.

Rastafarai. Police only go after dealers at Carnival. Same in Brixton. Too many people smoking joints. Plus it's not a criminal offence if it's for personal use.

Kei looked appalled.

Kei, the police get far more trouble from people drinking alcohol. Potheads help keep the peace.

Archie arrived, scooping Erika up in his arms at the door. *Good timing*, he said, pouncing on the joint.

He's a teacher! Kei whispered to Erika.

Seriously Kei, by Monday night it'll all seem perfectly normal.

What would Auntie Michiko say?

'Let me have a puff' is what she would say. She and Julian smoked it all the time.

I don't believe it.

There's a lot about my mother you wouldn't believe.

The first boom of a dub beat rattled the glass in the window frames. *Here we go*, said Erika.

That is very loud, said Kei. Competing beats began to bounce around the streets as the procession grew nearer. She stuck her head out of the window. *Many people!*

Wait until tomorrow, said Erika. That's *many people*.

The excitement outside was palpable. *Come on*, said Sarah, *I don't want to miss the parade.*

Spilling down the stairs, they emerged blinking in the sunlight and at the delicious, dense smoke rising from stalls lining the street. They ordered jerk chicken, rice and peas, salt fish and ackee, then, clutching their food, pushed through already heaving crowds towards Ladbroke Grove.

Kei, hold my hand! shouted Erika. *Just keep pushing through.* The jubilant sound of steel pans shimmered, almost palpable in the air, bass beats thumping up through their bellies and into their throats. *Here comes the parade, come on, hurry!*

The warm spicy smoke, the million rainbow colours, the heat, the pounding, urgent beats swirled about in an intoxicating haze. An electric thrill surged through the crowds, passing from person to person, grinning faces everywhere, whooping and whistling, hands in the air, couples kissing, children with balloons, happy policemen, people pushing ice and drink filled wheelbarrows, grizzled old Rastas with greying dreads lolloping to reggae. Erika looked back at her cousin whose hand she held tight and saw that Kei, too, had been infected with elation. The crowds grew densest along the barriers lining Ladbroke Grove, and breaking through at last, Erika presented it all to Kei with a wave of an arm, almost with pride — the parade bouncing and grinding along Ladbroke Grove like a giant pulsating creature; the exultant dancers in sequins and feathers and rainbow colours; the open-sided trucks bouncing as steel pan players jumped to the beat of Soca; the MCs blaring blurs of sound; the crowd blowing their whistles to the beat. Kei beamed and jumped in time to the music. Erika saw her mouth moving, but her voice was lost in overwhelming loudness. She grinned, and swinging her cousin's hand, began to dance with her, taking bites from her jerk chicken sandwich in the other hand, sauce dripping down her chin.

The river of people and bass beats flowed past them and as one float's entourage and its music thinned out, the clashing beats of the next began to merge with it in a sonic soup. Calypso, reggae, Soca, samba; on and on it went against the bass beat backdrop of the neighbouring streets' sound systems. Sarah pulled a joint out of her ponytail, lighting it and holding it out to Kei, her eyebrows raised in question, and Kei took it. Erika watched her cousin hold it gingerly between her fingers and take a tentative puff before coughing out a cloud of smoke. Her eyes watered as she choked, but she waved Erika away when she started pounding on her back. She gestured to Archie for a swig from his water bottle. Then she took another puff, holding it in this time, before passing it to Erika.

Wow, she mouthed. Kei was already loosening up, dancing to reggae, eyes closed, rocking her weight from foot to foot. She opened her eyes and saw Erika watching, and grinned, then pulled her close, her lips up against her ear.

I can't believe I had some! she shouted.

I can't believe it either. Do you like it?

Fantastic! It is all very fantastic! she shouted, in English, and put her arms out.

Sarah and Archie responded wordlessly, putting an arm each around her shoulders, Kei the filling in their sandwich. Erika watched them sway together, then joined in.

Group hug! yelled Sarah. They closed into a tight circle, pressed in by the mass of people, their bodies synchronised by the pulsing vibration of the passing procession, and Erika heard Kei again in her ear.

Thank you, she said.

That evening, as the sound systems boomed on, they made their way back to Cambridge Terrace for a drink and a rest. They'd start again tomorrow. Once the volume outside began to subside, Archie turned up the stereo.

Won't Mrs Mackenzie mind? asked Kei.

She's gone to stay with her daughter, like she does every Carnival weekend. It's all too much for her. Just as well though, it's the only time she gets to see her daughter and grandchildren.

Kei slumped on the sofa. *That's good. Well, I love it. I can't wait for tomorrow. Although...ow...my feet.* She took off her socks and massaged her toes.

Erika sat on the floor beside her and took a foot in her hand. *Here.* She began kneading.

Lucky Kei, said Archie. *I never get that.* Kei looked puzzled, so Erika translated.

Really, Eri? You never massage his feet for him?

Should I?

It's a nice thing for a wife to do for a husband, said Kei.

We're not married, said Erika.

I used to do it all the time for Jun. Kei's face fell. *Though it made no difference in the end. He left me.*

Hearing Kei give this information up so easily was a shock.

Oh, Kei...

He left me for somebody else.

Is everything ok? asked Archie, sensing the change in mood.

Kei looked at him sadly, her head swaying a little. *My husband. He leave me.* The four of them processed this information for a moment.

He's a very silly man, said Sarah. *Leaving a lovely woman like you. He didn't know what was good for him.*

Erika translated.

Kei shrugged and drew on a joint before passing it on. *Unfinished Symphony* played its melancholy out on the stereo against the sound of drunken carnival-goers on their way home outside.

It must have been difficult for you, said Erika.

If he were still with me he wouldn't have let me come to London, Eri, said Kei. *He was very controlling.*

I know it's a strange question, said Erika, *but can I ask you why you came to London? I mean really?*

I hadn't seen you for so long. And also because I wanted a break from everything after Jun left.

So it wasn't to check that I'd organised a grave for Michiko's bones?

Kei looked at her, perplexed. *Why would I? I came because I wanted to see you. And I've been working so hard for the family business, I needed a holiday. And the whole thing with Jun. The divorce was horrible.*

They fell silent again. Sarah was slumped on the sofa with her eyes closed. Archie was gazing at Kei and Erika with a faint smile, looking serene, nodding his head in time to the music.

I had so much fun today, said Kei.

Me too, said Erika. *I'm glad you got to see it. You timed your visit well.*

I wish I could come again next year.

Well then, come.

I don't have the freedom you have. You're lucky.

I don't feel lucky, said Erika, opening a bottle of wine. *I belong nowhere. I have no country. No family.*

You've got Archie, said Kei. *He's a kind man.* At the mention of his name, Archie sat up.

You two talking about me?

You can do what you want, go where you want, continued Kei. *I'm locked into the family and the business. I could never do anything other than what's been planned for me. Especially now that I'm divorced. The family takes care of me, and I serve the family. I have no choice. You have no ties. You're lucky.*

Hey, what are you talking about? asked Archie.

Sorry, said Kei, with a smile. The cousins looked at one another with serious faces. But Kei had a twinkle in her eye and Erika couldn't help herself smile. Kei smiled back.

That's better, said Archie. *I wasn't much liking the long faces. Anyway, what were you two saying about me?*

We were saying how wonderful you are, said Erika.

By the time they'd had breakfast next morning, shaking off hangovers with several cups of coffee, the streets below were already thronged with people. The sound systems were rattling

the windows again. Watching Kei put on a bright yellow sundress she'd bought from a stall the previous afternoon, her hair untied and loose around her shoulders, her skin browned from the sun, Erika struggled to connect her with the pale and prim woman she'd picked up at the airport only a week earlier. The only reminder of that other cousin was the gold chain with the pearl pendant that Kei wore.

They were dancing at a reggae sound system when it was snatched from Kei's neck. There had been a vortex in the crowd around them, of people shouting and pushing. At first it seemed like another cluster of overexcited carnival goers. But it gained momentum, like a tornado, and as it grew closer, Erika saw youths breaking free from the whirl, arms and hands grabbing, shouting, dodging and sprinting. Watches were ripped from wrists, bags seized, jewellery grabbed. It all happened so fast that Kei didn't notice at first; she had been dancing, swaying, eyes closed. Feeling something at her neck she drew her hands there, but it was Erika — carrying nothing of value, nor wearing any jewellery — who noticed.

They took your necklace!

People around them looked stunned; Archie and a few others gave chase, but it was as if the thieves had simply melted into the crowds ahead, a plague of locusts that could disassemble and reassemble at will, impossible to catch, plundering everything in its path.

Kei blinked, still unsure about what had happened.

Oh Kei, cried Erika. Your necklace! She was on the verge of tears. A woman nearby had had earrings ripped from her earlobes; they were bleeding. *Sarah! Did they take anything?*

I tucked my money in my jeans pocket but they didn't go there. I guess they didn't think my jewellery worth taking. What an insult. Her grin was half-hearted.

Erika wondered if Kei understood that she had just been robbed; she wore a perplexed expression and was rubbing the space at her clavicle where the pearl should have been. *Are you okay, Kei-chan?*

Your necklace. Repeating this was all Erika felt she could do. We'll report it stolen to the police.

It doesn't matter, said Kei.

But it was a gold chain! And a real pearl. A tear trickled down Erika's cheek.

Why are you crying? It really doesn't matter.

I brought you here...you've lost your precious necklace...

Eri-chan, stop, said Kei, patting her shoulder. Please.

Met officers had arrived, clearing up the locust trail. Crowds clustered around them giving descriptions, gesturing, reporting what had been taken.

Let's tell them about it. If they find it, then they'll have a way to get it back to you.

Erika grabbed her cousin's hand and pulled her towards the officers.

Erika. Kei stopped and tugged back, hard, until she was facing her cousin. It's gone.

Jun gave it to me. Maybe I was meant to lose it today.

You didn't lose it Kei, it was stolen from you.

But maybe I'm meant to let it go. It's just a thing, Erika. An object. It's not my life, or yours. Let it go. Remember?

Archie put his arm around Erika. *Why are you so upset? Look, Kei's fine. None of us got hurt. You didn't have anything taken. I didn't, neither did Sarah. Kei's the only one, and she's fine. How come you're taking it this so badly?*

Just having stuff taken. It's a violation.

But nothing of yours was taken.

But Kei's necklace. It was given to her by her ex-husband.

Maybe it's good she's rid of a reminder.

That's what she said, said Erika.

You see? Archie rubbed her arms. Come on. Let's go home.

Although Kei seemed unperturbed by the incident — Archie and Erika told the police that it had been taken, just in case — the mood was noticeably subdued as they walked home.

That was a bummer of an end to Carnival, said Sarah. *Just as well Luca's staying with Meg. Last year it was someone letting off tear gas canisters. We shouldn't be surprised.*

But it's still horrible when it happens, said Erika.

Your cousin seems remarkably cool about it, considering. Turning to Kei, Sarah said, *Kei, are you all right?*

Kei smiled. *I am all right. No problem. This,* said Kei, waving a joint, *helping.*

After a dinner of delivered pizza Sarah went to catch a bus to Maida Vale to pick Luca up from her sister's. She left the rest of the grass with them and Archie rolled another. The three of them sat around the dining table, listening to music, smoking. Archie suddenly jerked upright and peered across.

Hey, the cabinet's been all tidied up. Did you do that? he asked Erika.

It was Kei.

It looks good with the flowers. I can smell the incense. Nice smell.

Kei, Archie says you made a nice job of the altar.

Kei beamed. *For my aunt. She was special person,* she said.

I'd like to have met her, said Archie.

I wonder what you'd have thought of her, murmured Erika. *She was special all right.*

She was very beautiful, said Kei. *Also, she was very sick.*

She died from diabetes. Erika told me.

Kei threw a quick look at her cousin. *You didn't tell him the truth?* she asked, in Japanese.

It's not an easy thing to tell him, said Erika. *Please don't say any more.*

It's a beautiful cabinet, said Archie. *Now that it's cleaned up it looks great. Is it antique?*

It's a replica. Quite an old one though. It was my mother's. It's Korean, said Erika.

I always thought it was Japanese.

Korean.

I couldn't tell the difference, said Archie.

Hard to describe, but there is. It's subtle, said Erika.

He pushed his chair back and wandered to the alcove, stooping to look at the lacquer tablet in its little case on top. *What does it say on this?*

It's the spirit name my mother was given by the temple when she died. It's called a kaimyou. It's meant to help a dead person's spirit sever its ties with the earth so it can be free of attachment. They say using the person's living name keeps them attached to earthly things, and suffering, so it's better to say their spirit names. I'm supposed to say a mantra every day for her spirit name, to help her get on with her spiritual journey. Elevate her to Bodhisattva-hood. All nonsense of course.

She went to stand next to him. *See? It's written in gold on the front. That, on the back, carved in red, is the name she had when she was alive, Takigawa Michiko. And that's the date she died, in kanji. 3rd November, Heisei 11. That's 1999, using the Japanese Imperial calendar.*

Archie looked at her. *You've never talked about this before.*

Erika took the tiny porcelain water cup from the altar and wiggled it at Kei. *Hey, I bet Michiko'd like some wine!* She took a bottle from the table and poured in a drop.

You're kidding, said Archie, looking over at Kei, who was smiling.

My mother loved her alcohol. Go to any cemetery at Obon — that's the festival of the ancestors — and you'll see gravestones piled high with cigarettes and booze. The sadder ones have sweets and stuffed toys for children on them.

Kei joined them. She lit two sticks of incense and handed one to Erika. Together they inserted them in the burner. Kei tapped the side of the bell gently, twice, with the wooden stick. She put her hands together and closed her eyes. Erika looked at her for a second, then

at Archie, before doing the same. She opened her eyes and puffed out her cheeks. *Okay, enough already.* She plumped back into the chair and took a swig of wine.

Are these diaries hers? asked Archie, looking at the pile at the end of the table.

Yeah. Kei's going to transcribe the kanji in them with hiragana so I can read what she's written. From what I saw before it's mostly boring stuff, though. Like 'weather sunny today, saw so and so, had dinner at so and so, went to the pool.' Dull as anything.

Archie turned back to admire the cabinet. *It's so unusual-looking. All these little panels and drawers.* He ran his hands down its sides. *Hey, did you know about this?*

He had pulled one of the small panels on the front and it had slid out to reveal a tiny drawer. It rattled as it opened.

There's something inside.

Erika jumped up to look. It was a heavy, elaborate gold ring set with a large blue stone. *What the hell...?*

Archie leaned in to look. *It's got something inscribed around the stone. It's heavy. Do you think it's real?*

It looks pretty tacky to me, said Erika. *It says 'West Point'. Oh, and a date. 1959.*

Do you think your mum put it there?

Christ knows. It's definitely not the kind of thing she would have worn. Anyway, it's enormous. It looks like a man's ring.

Do you think it was Julian's? asked Kei.

He didn't wear rings, he hated them, said Erika. *And I've never seen this before.*

Isn't West Point a military training academy in the States? asked Archie. *Like Sandhurst?*

Maybe it was already in there when Michiko and Julian bought it, said Erika. *Can't think why they'd have had something like that. How odd.*

It's surprising they didn't find it. It wasn't that hard to spot the secret panel.

I didn't spot it, did I? I've had it for years, said Erika.

But you've never looked at it properly, said Archie. *It's the first time I've seen it tidy, thanks to Kei.* He looked over at her, then said to Erika, in a quiet voice, *So she forgave you?*

It's a bit complicated. But she's not angry like I thought she was, no.

So what did she say?

Oh, that I just have to deal with them at some point. Look, can we talk about this another time? I feel we're leaving her out. She gestured at her cousin, who was examining the ring.

Definitely a man's ring, Kei said, bemused, rubbing at the inscription. *How strange.*

Dai Rokushō

*

Michiko leaned her forehead against the train window, watching the swooping rise and fall of cable lines strung between the telegraph poles as they punctuated the passing landscape with their flicking rhythm. Her first long train journey since she was a small child, she had been riveted by the river of houses, roads and fields, the snatched scenes of village life, but was now growing tired of the monotony. Sunlight flashed on and off the water filled rice paddies, which were nearly ready for harvesting. They had eaten their *onigiri* balls; Michiko had packed away the lunch basket and poured them tea from a thermos. At the next station they might buy some sweets or some fruit.

They had been travelling for most of the day. She patted the back of her mother's hand, which lay limp in her lap.

Mother? She spoke slowly, deliberately. She put her face close to her mother's and smiled. She squeezed her hand. *Mother? Do you remember that day we had to throw all the sweet potatoes out of the window? It almost seems funny now, doesn't it?*

She watched her mother's eyes roll toward her, and the source of the voice, but they looked blankly without recognition. There was a smear of saliva on her lower lip. Michiko took a handkerchief from her bag and dabbed at it. *There.*

Michiko often wondered why the neighbours hadn't just called for an ambulance instead of bringing her mother home. Their lives would all have been so different if they'd just stopped to think. Instead they'd lugged her into the back of the shop, unconscious, her *yukata* folded back to reveal one of her legs splayed at a curious and impossible angle, a flap of flesh hanging open like a book from which protruded white bone. Her visible injuries had eventually mended, but the blow to the head she'd sustained as she slid over the car bonnet

and fell into the road had left her mind irreparably diminished. The neighbours said the car hadn't even been going very fast, but they'd been struck with such panic that they'd done the first thing they could think of, which was to bring her home. She'd flailed this way and that as they wielded her clumsily, scattering drops of blood, laying her on the dais at the back of the shop. It was an image Michiko would retain long after her mother had been whisked away to the hospital.

The doctors had told them that if she had been treated sooner, she would not have suffered such a loss of blood. She had nearly died, her brain deprived of oxygen for too long. However, there was still a chance that she might recover her old self again, they said; it was important for the family to treat her as normal, that they talk to her about familiar things in an attempt to trigger her memory. Each of them secretly held little hope.

An already planned match for Kensuke had been hastily concluded so the bride could take over their mother's duties in the household and tea business. It was as elaborate a wedding as could be managed given the austerity of these post-war years, and Michiko knew that the modest dowry was more than made up for by the prestige of marrying the future head of a fine and respectable family. It irritated Michiko every time she heard her father talk to her new sister-in-law, for he spoke to her with a kindness and respect that she herself had never experienced from him. *You're only like that with her because she's useful to you*, she wanted to say, but bit her lip. Fusae had left the household long ago, her match made, and was fulfilling her new duties as daughter-in-law elsewhere. She was allowed only rarely to come and tend to her mother, but as it became evident that her mother no longer recognised her, she came less and less. Michiko supposed that eventually a match would be made for her, too, but as the youngest daughter there was not much expected for her, especially now that she would be needed to care for her mother. *Your beauty is compromised by your bad attitude*, her mother had once told her. *You must be more ladylike*, she'd said, *not so impetuous and wilful. If you are to marry well, my dear, you must try harder*. But she had not been interested in any of the young men that had been presented to her. The men she took home

from the cinemas to dream about at night — the Rock Hudsons, the James Stewarts, the Richard Burtons — made all the men she met in reality seem ridiculously inadequate. She knew, too, that wherever she went to be wed, she would become an indentured servant to strangers instead of to her own family. She preferred the tyranny of her father. Friends who had been married off told how they were bullied and made to work their fingers to the bone. At each matchmaking introduction Michiko took pains to cross her arms and slump over the table, to look indifferent and sullen, yawning and picking at her fingers. She chewed gum at one meeting, enjoying the look of horror on the potential mother-in-law's face. Time after time the response came from the prospective groom's family, *No thank you, she is not right for our son*, and Michiko would take her relief and escape again and again with it into the world of the silver screen. *You will behave and do as you are told. You are not too old for a beating*, her father had said, and as he walked away she shadowboxed behind him, enraged. Her mother had had to hug her close, pinning her arms until she'd calmed down. *If he sees you doing that...my dear, I just wish you would stop goading him.*

She was sorry for the trouble she'd caused her mother; about upsetting her father she could not have cared less. So when he ordered her to accompany her mother on the long journey south, back to the islands where she had been born, Michiko obeyed. She hoped that seeing the landscape and people of her childhood might help bring back her mother's lost mind. Besides, she had always dreamed of visiting this magical place Kensuke had told her about since she was a child. But a sense of heaviness weighed down her excitement. She wished she could have shared this journey with her mother long ago, before the accident, so that they might have undone the miserable memory of their last long train journey together. But she was not sure her mother was even aware of who she was, or where they were going.

A Necklace, with Gold Heart Padlock

The chain is made up of links so fine and delicate it appears smooth and seamless. It is slender and of dusky gold, with a high enough carat to make it valuable — yet not so high that it is too soft to be sturdy. On it is suspended a padlock in the shape of a heart, made of a paler gold than the chain. Of low carat, its gold is hard enough not to scratch easily, and the jeweller's tiny markings on its back, more than thirty years old, can still be seen: the initials WJS in a small rectangle, the maker's mark; below it a hallmark, with the 375 declaring it to be a gold of nine carats. Beside these are two symbols proclaiming the assay, miniscule and now somewhat too worn to be decipherable, even under a magnifying glass. The heart is roughly one-and-a-half centimetres wide by two centimetres high, with a thickness of a half centimetre. Four make-believe screw heads are etched onto its face. The lock opens and closes on its tiny hinge without the aid of a key, although the keyhole in its front looks so real that one wonders if there was once a key; a key that might have kept the heart locked.

“Shiranu Ga Hotoke”

Ignorance is bliss

*

Two days before Kei left to go back to Tokyo it hit her that she was going to miss her cousin. She was elated that the visit had gone so well — despite the initial prickliness of their first days together and the theft of the necklace — and that the nightmare scenarios she’d envisaged had not materialised.

She felt herself shutting down, hardening herself against the impending separation. A fortnight ago, she would have given anything not to have to spend any time with her cousin, but felt so differently about it now that she also began to question her understanding of other things. Being back in the adrenaline-pumped kitchen with André would keep her distracted but the realisation that for the first time — perhaps ever — she felt reluctant to go back to work shocked her. Erika was to drop Kei off at the airport in the morning and be ready for service the same evening. If only she’d taken one more day’s leave; she’d clocked up enough overtime over the years that André wouldn’t have hesitated to give her the extra time off. But asking for it at this late stage was out of the question, even though it would have allowed her the mental space to process everything her cousin’s visit and departure had stirred up; time to find her old self again, so it would not be such a shock to return to life as before.

They sat together at the dining table, the setting sun casting golden shadows into the room, as Kei scribbled *furigana* with rapt concentration against Michiko’s diary entries written in *kanji*. Erika flicked through the hundreds of photographs she’d taken over the last fortnight as she organised them on her laptop, smiling as she recalled the cheery moments they’d captured. Occasionally she’d exclaim and flip the laptop around to show Kei.

Earlier that day they’d been on a day trip to Windsor, to see the castle, and had returned home worn out. They were content to stay in for the evening. Kei had insisted she

wanted to cook and had potted off on her own to the butchers' and the supermarket in Notting Hill Gate to get ingredients for dinner. *It won't be gourmet, she'd said, but I want to make a good old-fashioned home-style Japanese meal of tonkatsu for you.* Erika knew she'd enjoy eating the homely *tonkatsu*, cabbage, miso and rice more than the meal they were planning to have tomorrow, to mark Kei's final night in London.

They were booked to eat at André's with Archie and Sarah. Kei had said she wanted to try the food at the restaurant where Erika worked. When Erika rang to reserve a table, Frankie, to Erika's amazement, promised to rustle up a tiptop *dégustation* her cousin would never forget, with extras. Simon would be on hand to keep their glasses topped up, he said. It would be a fine-dining feast, one of the best in London. But the meal Kei was going to cook meant far more to Erika.

This diary is from Auntie's time in Hong Kong, said Kei. She and Julian were invited out to so many parties! She hardly ever had a night at home.

I know. I remember, said Erika.

I wish she'd written in a bit more detail, said Kei. She just says where the parties were, what jewellery and clothes she wore and what they ate. Lucky Auntie, she had such a glamorous life.

Erika hadn't minded so much at the time that her mother was rarely at home with her; the *amah* was always kind to her, meeting her at the school bus stop, cooking delicious Hokkien dishes for her dinner, bathing her and tucking her into bed; sometimes, if her granddaughter Shu Lin was visiting from the New Territories, she and Erika would play together, miming when their English or Cantonese failed them. But whenever Erika saw her *amah*'s daughter stroke Shu Lin's hair, or gaze at her with an unfathomable look of tenderness, she felt something cut deep through her.

Kei, you don't have to transcribe all of these, said Erika, gesturing at the pile of diaries. Don't feel you have to do it. Besides, we only have this one last evening alone together. Why don't we talk instead? Tell me more about you, about Tokyo, about the shop.

Nothing has changed, especially now that I'm single again. Still the same house. Still the same shop. Still the same people. Kōsuke and Mayumi-chan's kids are always fun, of course. But otherwise it's utterly dull. And no, I haven't changed my mind. Doing this gives me a glimpse into Auntie's exciting life – and yours. How lucky you were to have that.

Erika contemplated her cousin for a moment. It's not the whole story, Kei.

Well, I'm enjoying looking at these. I hope you won't mind me taking some back home. I'm sure there's enough room in my suitcase. The next time we meet, bring me more to work on, and I'll give you these old ones back. Now there's a reason to see one another again.

Erika couldn't bring herself to squash her cousin's enthusiasm. I guess it'll be interesting to see what Mother got up to.

Good, Kei said, though you're right, I should do these another time. I'd like to get dinner going in an hour or so. She closed the diary she was working on, marking her spot with a bookmark. It's your turn. Tell me more about you. What are you working towards? Do you want to run your own restaurant? Be a head chef?

I've never given it much thought, said Erika. I'm happy to keep doing what I'm doing. I don't have the ambition and drive I need to be a head chef. I don't have the personality for it. It pays the bills, I get to cook, and that's enough.

Isn't it tiring?

Exhausting. But that's good. Stops me from thinking too much about things.

The hours are so anti-social. No weekends, no evenings.

Sarah works with me so I get to see her almost every day. And I see Archie often enough. Erika closed her laptop.

Do you think you'll marry Archie? I suppose you'd give up being a chef then, once you start a family.

God, no, said Erika, laughing.

Why are you so against the idea? asked Kei. *He's a nice person. He obviously cares for you.*

I know how lucky I am to have him. But I think he deserves better.

Isn't that for him to decide?

Erika pondered this for a second. *I just don't like the idea of getting married. I don't feel I was made for it. You know how some girls imagine their wedding day from the moment they get into high school, deciding what kind of dress they're going to wear, what kind of man they'll marry, how many kids they'll have and all that?*

Kei smiled wryly. *Yes, I know. I was like that once.*

Oh..I'm sorry...

Don't be. I think you and Archie make a fine couple. Please, give me an excuse to come to London again. I'd love to come to an English wedding.

Kei, stop. And please don't mention this in front of Archie tomorrow.

You mean, he's asked you already?

Erika hesitated. *Not in so many words... but he's talked about it, and...*

And what?

I've made it clear I don't want to.

Oh Erika. You don't want to stay childless and end up lonely and alone.

That's no reason to marry someone.

I suppose you'd say I'm not a great example, what with my divorce.

It wasn't your fault. And I really am so sorry that happened to you. But I'm sure you'll have no problem finding somebody else. Somebody who treats you better. You must have them queuing up.

I think that's enough marriage for me. I'm happy with this life now. She smiled at her cousin.

Erika fetched a bottle of wine from the fridge and poured them a glass each. They sipped at their glasses in solemn silence.

Michiko was not the poster girl for great marriages. Two. And she was never happy.

Yes, I'm sorry your parents divorced. But with Auntie's second marriage, it was Julian who was difficult, wasn't it? Julian left her.

It's a bit more complicated.

It must have been hard for Auntie to end up being a single mother after she and Donald divorced. Especially in Japan, with a hafu child. And I'm sorry that you never really knew your father. It was good Julian came along to take his place.

Erika snorted. Oh, you don't need to feel bad for Mother. She went straight from my father to Julian. She never liked to be alone. She held up the bottle to Kei, who shook her head. Erika poured wine nearly to the top of her glass, took two gulps, filled it up again. When I grew older I was furious. She hadn't wanted to have anything more to do with Donald. Didn't care about taking a man's child out of his life forever, didn't care whether I'd want to know my own father.

Do you have any idea what happened to him? asked Kei.

He gave up teaching in Japan. I heard he went back to England after she left him for Julian. When she moved to Hong Kong she didn't leave a forwarding address. Didn't bother telling him where she took me. Imagine having no idea where your child is! She said he didn't want to have anything to do with me. But I don't believe it. I keep thinking that somewhere there's a pile of letters he's been sending me over the years. Every now and then I do a search for him online. But he seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth. Doesn't he want to find me? I mean, if I were him, I'd do anything to make myself traceable, in case my lost daughter tried to get back in touch.

Kei looked at her, concerned. Do you remember him at all? You were only little.

I was three or four. I do remember him, a bit. Although I think my memories are mixed up with the photos my mother kept. It's strange, there aren't any of him and me together. They're all of him and her, and she's pregnant in almost all of them. I don't have any memories of my father and me doing anything together, either. Erika trailed off, a

faraway expression in her eyes. Suddenly, she snapped back, her eyes blazing. *Oh, and before I forget, there's something you should know. Julian was the last person on earth who could be a father figure. Ever. Godzilla would have made a better father replacement than Julian.* Erika felt drained all of a sudden. She inhaled long and slow, held her breath. Exhaled. *Come on, let's talk about more cheerful things. Actually – there's something I wanted to give you.* She got up to go her bedroom, returning with something in her hand, and held it out to Kei. *It's to replace the one that was lost at the weekend. It was Michiko's. I know she'd have loved you to have it.*

Kei lifted the fine gold chain out of Erika's palm. At its end dangled a gold heart-shaped pendant.

Oh! A locket!

Actually, it's a padlock. A padlock in the shape of a heart.

Kei was silent for a while, staring at the necklace. When she looked up her eyes were shining. *You can't give this to me Erika, it's too precious. It's your mother's. And it's a gold heart. You should be the one to keep it.*

I never wear it. Here, try it on. She stood behind Kei, undid the clasp, looped the chain around her neck and fastened it. The padlock rested neatly in her clavicle.

Perfect, said Erika. It looks like it was always meant to be yours.

Kei headed to the kitchen to cook dinner, refusing offers of help. She took the bottle of wine and two glasses in with her, motioning Erika to follow. She drew out a chair from under the little Formica-topped kitchen table and patted it.

Sit here, she said. Talk to me while I cook, but don't you dare lift a finger. I can manage perfectly well myself.

Come on, surely there's something I can do. I'm happy to help.

You'll only get in the way, said Kei. Besides, it's time someone else cooked for you, for a change.

They talked sporadically about the cooking, about their plans for tomorrow, about Archie and Sarah. Erika watched Kei dip thin slices of pork escalope in beaten egg, then flour, then *panko* breadcrumbs before laying them gently into a shimmering layer of oil in a frying pan. She had wrapped foil around Erika's baking racks and propped them upright around the pan, to protect her tiles from the spitting oil. The sound of frying was loud and comforting. Kei was proficient with the knife, finely shredding white cabbage with impressive speed. She mixed ketchup with HP sauce – *Look, just like Bulldog Sauce*, she said – and when the rice steamer pinged she ladled a neat mound of steaming rice into Michiko's blue and white rice bowl and another into Erika's red and blue striped one. She made a bed of shredded cabbage on blue white plates she'd instinctively chosen; they were the same ones Michiko used whenever she made this dish. As she sliced the *tonkatsu* she puffed and blew at her fingers – *Hot, hot* – then scooped them off the chopping board with the knife, still in the shape of the escalope, and arranged them on top of the cabbage. A flourish of her home-made Bulldog Sauce on top and the meal was ready. Erika wanted to stay in the kitchen to eat it. Somehow it felt right. She set chopsticks, placemats, teacups and the pickle jar on the little table while Kei boiled the kettle for the *hōji* tea.

As delicious as the tonkatsu at Suzuki's, said Erika.

Kei beamed. *Really? Thank you!*

They settled into the meal, eating in comfortable silence. It was a feeling Erika had not experienced for a long time, but there was something about the choice of dish, about eating at the kitchen table, about the silence interspersed with occasional commentary on the food they were eating that echoed within her, nudging at memories of eating such a dish in such a way with someone she had once deeply loved; someone who found it impossible to express intimacy with her in any other way than by feeding her, by sharing a meal with her. But as soon as the thought arose, she shut it down.

Erika and Kei had a good-humoured fight over who would do the dishes.

You cooked! Come on, I'm the one who should wash up.

I was offering the whole package! Cooking the meal and washing up as well. The whole point was having you do nothing tonight except enjoy the food.

I enjoyed the food enormously. And I'll be even happier if you'd let me wash up.

Really. She stood in front of the sink, her arms crossed, blocking Kei's way.

Kei gave in with a laugh. *A bit more transcribing, then.* She emptied her teacup. *Just another couple of pages left to do of that diary I'm working on. Then I can start a new one. I thought I might pick one from when she was much younger, you know, before she was married. There'll be things in there about our grandparents — and about my father when he was young. I might as well get the new one started tonight; then maybe depending on how much time we have here tomorrow, I could finish the next one as well, then that's two less to take back with me to Tokyo.*

Kei disappeared into the sitting room. Erika hummed as she washed up, taking occasional swigs of tea. Once the teapot was empty she opened another bottle of wine. *Another glass of wine?* she called out.

Yes, please.

She took it through to her cousin, who slapped the diary closed with a flourish.

I'm on a roll. I'm enjoying this. Right, on to the next one. I've picked one from 1966, the year she went to Okinawa.

Okinawa? My mother went to Okinawa?

See? It's great I'm doing this. There's all kinds of stuff about your mother you probably don't know.

The meal at André's the following night was as magnificent as Frankie had promised. Kei loved everything about it and said how impressed she was that Erika could be working at such a place. The kitchen had clearly made a special effort for them. Frankie brought out their *amuses-bouches* himself before the meal got under way. *All right, you lot?* he said, his face sweating. *Hullo Erika. Thought I'd come out quick before it got hairy in there. Only just kicking off. Wanted to check out your cousin. Hello, how are you?* He shook Kei's hand. Throughout the evening Antonia brought dish after dish to their table — something extra, compliments of the kitchen — and their glasses never emptied. Even André came out at the end of their meal to ask Kei if she'd enjoyed it, clasping her hand in his in response to her enthusiastic appreciation of everything she'd eaten.

Oh my god, he's flirting with her, Sarah whispered out of the corner of her mouth at Erika. *Stop him, it's embarrassing.*

Bless. I've never seen him so charming, said Erika. He was bent over Kei's chair, keeping her hand in one of his while gesturing expansively with the other. She was clearly flattered to be given all this attention from the famous chef.

You two leave him alone, whispered Archie. *Look, he's in his element.*

Very, very delicious, Kei was saying, beaming. *Very special meal. Very special restaurant.*

Erika watched her cousin closely. When André left them she saw the smile fall so completely off her cousin's face that she almost asked there and then what was wrong. Kei seemed genuine in her appreciation of every dish that appeared on their table; she joined in their conversations in faltering English, joining in, too, in moments of laughter. But in between those moments, in a heartbeat of silence, there was a flash of perturbation, of anxiety in her face.

Does Kei seem upset to you? Erika asked Archie when Kei went to the bathroom.

No, why?

I dunno, she seems a bit...down.

She seems pretty jolly to me, he said.

How about you, Sarah? asked Erika.

I didn't notice anything either, said Sarah. But then again, you know her better than I do. Maybe she's upset this is her last night in London, suggested Sarah.

Maybe. Their coffees arrived, with a plate of jewel-like *petit-fours*.

I'm pleased it turned out well for you, babe, said Archie, pouring cream into his espresso. *You were dreading it.*

I know.

She's fabulous, said Sarah. *Not how you made her out to be at all.*

I feel guilty about the things I said about her now. She was so different last time I saw her. Erika downed her espresso in one. *I actually think I'm going to miss her. Shh, here she comes.*

Erika asked the cab driver to take them across London before driving back to Cambridge Terrace, criss-crossing the Thames. They had the windows pulled down; the balmy air of the late summer evening cut through with a hint of the chill autumn to come. The lack of a moon was irrelevant against the glittering jewellery box of the city night. As they drove across Waterloo Bridge, St Paul's Cathedral glowing iridescent, Erika stuck her head out of the window and whooped. She pulled back inside and said to Kei, *I love crossing the bridges at night. London at its most beautiful.*

Kei had a far away expression. She looked at Erika with a sad smile. *Yes.*

Are you okay? You seem a bit...

Kei shook her head, as if wiping clean thoughts she'd been having. *Yes, yes, I'm fine.*

They were driving along the Embankment.

The lights strung along the river — they look like diamond necklaces, said Erika. She was a little drunk. She took Kei's hand. Kei stiffened a little, then relaxed.

Erika, I've enjoyed visiting you so much. Thank you for looking after me so well. Tonight was wonderful.

It's been my pleasure, said Erika, meaning it. *I wish you could come to visit more often.* She turned to Archie and Sarah and translated.

Archie put his arm around Erika and squeezed. *That's great babe. Well, maybe it's your turn to go and visit Kei in Japan. And I can come with you.*

Awww...I want to come too, said Sarah.

Kei understood. *Please! Everybody please come and see me in Tokyo.*

They were in Chelsea now.

Albert Bridge, Miss? asked the driver.

Yes, please! Look, Kei, the most beautiful bridge in the whole of London. Do you see the lights? And over there in Battersea Park, do you see that? That's the Peace Pagoda. A proper Buddhist one.

Kei nodded; she still seemed distant. Perhaps she *was* sad to be leaving. Erika wasn't looking forward to their parting tomorrow. There might even be tears. She gazed at her cousin, the closest thing she had to a sister. And she marvelled again at how, in only fourteen days, just how much had changed.

Dai Nanashou

*

They were polite to him, face to face. It was a Sunday evening and everyone had gathered in the large *tatami* room above the shop. Curiosity had drawn the neighbours out of their houses into the street as Donald Underwood arrived at the Takigawas' front door. Michiko let him in.

Line your shoes up neatly when you take them off, she whispered. They'll be checking for anything that reinforces the fact that you're a gaijin barbarian.

They went upstairs. Michiko slid open the door and there they all were, gathered around the table: her father at the head of the table; Fusae and her husband seated to his right; their children stared goggle-eyed at Donald as he sat down, the oldest giggling at the sight of him plopping awkwardly onto the *tatami* and using his hands to cross his legs. Kensuke and a heavily pregnant Mayumi were there too. Mayumi had made fresh red-bean paste-filled *daifuku* cakes and arranged them in a pile on an enormous plate in the middle of the table. She struggled up off the floor and went into the kitchen to boil water for the tea.

Hajimemashite, said Donald to her father and mother, bowing deeply. I am honoured to meet you.

Takigawa grunted. Inclined his head a little.

Michiko hadn't known what to expect. The awkwardness was there, certainly, but she was amazed that her father engaged Donald in conversation, asking him about his teaching job at the English school, about his family in England, asking him how long he'd been in Japan and what he thought of it. Donald's forehead shone with perspiration. Michiko had grown impatient with the many nervous questions he'd been asking over the last week: what he should wear to impress her father, what he should talk about, whether her father would like

him, how he could make up for the fact that he was a *gaijin* and that he had no matchmaker to act as a go-between for the wedding arrangements.

Oh, stop being so pathetic, she'd snapped. Be a man. We'll find someone to be a go-between. Isn't there someone at the school who would do the job?

He had put on his cleanest cardigan and knotted a tie tightly around his neck. His hair was slicked across the top of his head with Brylcreem. Despite Michiko's protestations, he had not bought a suit for the occasion. *I'd only be buying it for this one thing Michiko, and I'd never wear it again,* he'd said.

What about when we get married?

I'll hire one.

I can't believe I'm marrying a man who never has call for a suit, said Michiko.

Donald protested. *Nobody wears them at the school. Better we save the money.*

When the baby comes we'll need every penny.

Don't say it!

What?

Don't talk about the baby!

Of course I won't talk about the baby. It's the last thing I want your father to know.

I mean at any time. I don't want to talk about the baby at all! and she had fled the room, slamming the door.

Chiyo sat beside her husband at the table. She smiled blankly at everyone, her head hanging limply to one side. Michiko was sure her mother had no idea what was going on. An awkward and heavy silence fell in the room. Mayumi came back in, passed the teapot to Michiko for pouring and handed the plate of *daifuku* to Donald. *Please, help yourself.*

He took one and nibbled at its corner. The children sniggered.

So. You are Michiko's English teacher, said Takigawa.

Actually, she is now being taught by another teacher, since it wasn't appropriate for her to be in my class any longer once we... once we... He searched for somewhere to put the *daifuku*.

Do you not like the cakes, Underwood-san? asked Mayumi.

Donald flushed. *Yes yes, of course, they're very nice, thank you,* he said, and stuffed it into his mouth, whole. He gagged. Michiko glared at him. The children laughed aloud.

Quiet! shouted Takigawa, and they fell silent.

I do not approve of her learning English, said Takigawa.

Oh..I... stammered Donald.

She has no need for it, Takigawa continued. *It is ridiculous. She will not need it in the shop, she will not need it to take care of her nieces and nephews, she will not need it to take care of her poor mother. But ever since she returned from a visit to her mother's family home in Okinawa she has insisted on spending her pay on English lessons. She used to spend it all on silly American movies and now it's English lessons. A waste of money. But Fusae would not let me stop her wages from the shop.*

Her English will come in useful when we are married, said Donald, in a quiet voice.

The silence grew painful. Takigawa stared at him for a long moment. Then he sipped noisily at his tea.

Michiko went around the table to her mother with the teapot, poured her another cup. *Here you go Mother, drink it while it's hot.* She took her hands in hers, patting them. She peered into her face, stroked her hair, her cheeks. *Mother,* she said. *Mother, my dear?*

Mmm?

Mother, this is Donald. He's come here to meet you.

Mmm. Chiyo said, nodding, smiling.

Well, said Takigawa, putting down his teacup. *You have been welcome in our home.*

Th-thank you, said Donald. More silence. He sipped at his tea.

Nobody said anything. Michiko leaped up from beside her mother and took Donald's arm. *You needed to go and meet with someone about your work, didn't you?*

Er...

Come along Donald, you don't want to be late, she said, ushering him out of the room and sliding the door closed behind them. *That meant it was time to leave*, she whispered as they went down the stairs.

What was?

My father saying you were welcome in our home.

Oh. Right. He nearly tripped down the steps.

And what were you thinking, talking about us getting married?

But we are. We have to, he said, reaching out for her belly. *N-not that that's a problem my darling, of course*, he added. *You know I love you.*

She slapped his hand away, furious. *I told you not to mention that!* she hissed. *We weren't going to mention marriage to my father until the next meeting! It wasn't the right time. You've gone and spoiled it now.* Her eyes welled with tears.

My darling..I'm sorry...

Go away now! I have to stay here, said Michiko. *Pick me up tomorrow after I finish at the shop.*

He bent down to tie his shoelaces, red in the face. They could already hear the neighbourhood children gathering outside the opaque glass of the thin sliding front door, whispering — *It's the gaijin! Come and look!*

Michiko had not expected her father even to talk to Donald, so she had some hope as she climbed back up the stairs. But there would be no next meeting. The intensity of the vitriol from her father stunned all of them. *No daughter of his was going to marry a foreigner*, he shouted. *What cheek did that gaijin have, talking as if it were already decided? Who did he think he was? How dare he presume he could marry into a family like this, as a foreigner? And to think: his daughter consorting with the old enemy as if she were some*

cheap pan-pan girl in a G.I. brothel! He slammed his fist on the table, making the crockery and everyone sitting around it jump. *An disgrace!* he cried. *A good thing your mother is out of her mind,* he said. *She would die of shame if she understood what her daughter was up to,* he shouted, as Chiyo continued to smile and nod at them all. The children crept away from the room but the others remained trapped around the table, Fusae looking down at her hands. *Father...* she whispered. *Perhaps you are being a little harsh...*

Shut up! he thundered. *Michiko. You are not marrying that foreigner. That is final. You are needed in this house. If you are to marry at all it will be to a Japanese man from a family of whom I approve. Do you understand?*

Michiko rose up from the *tatami*.

Sit down while I am talking to you!

No.

Fusae and Mayumi gasped. *Michiko...* her sister pleaded.

I will not sit down!

Her father stood up. A vein on his forehead bulged. *Sit down this instant!*

No! She turned her back and made to leave the room.

If you go through that door now you are never to come back.

Fine.

Michiko... said Fusae.

You will not come back to this house. Do you understand? You will pack your things and leave. If you leave this room you are no longer a part of this family.

Michiko slid the door closed behind her.

Never come back! she heard her father shout. *You are dead to me! Do you hear?*

Dead!

Fusae found her sister hunched over a suitcase in their old room. Michiko wept as she packed. *Oh Aya-chan, why do you do these things?* she asked. *Why do you always have to make father so angry?*

Fat tears dropped onto her clothes as Michiko packed them. She picked up a small cloth doll wearing a red and white gingham dress and blue shoes. She smoothed its golden hair, placed it carefully on top of her clothes. *I don't know what to do, Oneh-chan.*

Just stay for a bit. Father will calm down. Then you can go and apologise. You know how he says things he doesn't mean when he's angry. He'll change his mind if you say you're sorry.

Michiko wiped her face and blazed: *I won't apologise. I'm not sorry.*

Michiko...they're just words. Just say you're sorry. For Mother's sake, more than anything.

Oh come on Fusae, Mother doesn't know what's happening. It won't make any difference to her whether I'm here or not. She broke down again in tears. But I'll miss her. Even the way she is, I'll miss her.

Well then, stay. And stay for me. It makes a difference to me.

You have Haruo-san and you have your children. You're busy with them. You don't need me.

Yes, we do. We need you to take care of Mother. And the boys will miss you. And when Ken and Mayumi-chan's baby arrives we'll need you even more.

My life was meant to be for more than that, Oneh-chan. I wasn't born just to be a slave to everyone.

We all have to accept our lot, Michiko. It's the only way to be content. If you fight everything, you'll never be happy.

I need to try for the best, Fusae. If I don't leave, I'll never know what I missed. Donald will take me to England so we can be married. Just think! He'll take me on an aeroplane! Then we'll come back to Tokyo. I'll bring you back all kinds of treasures.

Besides, Donald's hoping to get a promotion at the school. You and I and the boys can still see each other. I'll make a great success of my life, as the wife of an Englishman. I'll be dressed in furs and diamonds and pearls. And then maybe Father will come round to the idea when he sees what a success I've made of myself. I don't want to be a spinster aunt. Or be the slave of a Japanese mother-in-law. I would die of misery. I have to go out and look for my happiness Fusae, I can't wait and hope it'll find me. If I don't find it, then I'll promise I'll accept my lot. Besides... she said, and placed her hand on her stomach.

Besides, what? asked Fusae.

Michiko wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and looked at her sister. Over the silence that yawned between them their eyes met, and held. Michiko's gaze imploring, lost; Fusae's, anxious, bewildered. Under the veil of fatigue cast by motherhood and wifehood, frayed with beginnings of fine lines, Fusae's eyes were the same as Michiko had always remembered. Unable to bear their silent communion any longer, she cast her eyes about the room, lingering upon the damp-stained walls, the worn tatami mats, her calendar on the wall of the Hollywood Greats. She would never see any of this again. She was glad to leave it all behind. But she did not want to think about how long she would have to wait before she might next see her sister.

Michiko-chan, Fusae pleaded, what do you mean — 'besides'?

Michiko said nothing, and carried on packing.

A College Ring

Weighty in the hand, it is a chunky gold-plated ring designed for a man's finger. It has an oval of blue stone set in its centre – glass, perhaps, or semi-precious stone, it is hard to tell – measuring one and a half centimetres high by a centimetre wide. The words “West Point” are inscribed in a semi-circle above the stone and a date, 1959, similarly curled beneath. Swirling and curving filigree, contrasting black with the gold, covers the remaining surfaces of the ring. It manages to appear ostentatious and serious at the same time. It is a bold ring that denotes belonging and pride.

“Seiten No Heki-Reki”

A thunderclap out of clear sky

*

Erika and Kei embraced at the departure gate. Their shared intimacies over the past fortnight had eradicated all awkwardness between them, as they smiled and promised one another that it wouldn't be so long before they met again. Kei's flight wasn't due to take off for over two hours — they'd arrived early, leaving the house with plenty of time to spare in case there were delays on the Tube, but the journey had gone smoothly. Erika had thought they might sit and share a coffee and a cake together before Kei went through the security checks, but Kei told her she hated lingering goodbyes, and hoped she didn't mind if she went through straight away. She promised she'd call as soon as she arrived back in Tokyo, then joined the queue. She seemed cheery, but Erika saw her dab at her eyes with a tissue as she turned forwards. And then she stood and watched until her cousin disappeared behind the barriers.

Erika shed a few tears of her own on the Tube journey home. She was tired. Maybe she'd have a nap when she got back so she'd be fresh for her return to the restaurant that evening. It was probably just as well, after all, that she hadn't taken that extra time off. Better she keep distracted by working. She wasn't looking forward to the empty flat. If she went to sleep as soon as she got in it wouldn't feel so bad. Anyway, she had to be at work by three to prep for evening service.

She had been asleep for less than half an hour when the phone rang. She had been dreaming; wrenched from deep sleep, she groaned and rolled over, putting a pillow over her head. The phone rang on until she heard the answering machine in the sitting room click into action.

Erika? It was Kei.

Erika almost fell out of the bed in her haste to get to the phone. She grabbed the receiver, jabbing the *stop* button on the answering machine. *Kei! I'm here.*

I thought maybe you'd gone somewhere on your way home. You sound fuzzy. I'm sorry, were you asleep? She sounded anxious.

What's happened? Has your flight been delayed?

No, we're boarding in a few minutes. She fell silent. Erika heard her breathing on the end of the line, the soft buzz of the airport's ambient noise a backdrop.

Kei, are you all right? What's the matter?

Erika, I have to talk to you.

What about?

Look, I know this sounds crazy, but...I was just sitting here at the gate waiting and had a thought, you know, about what would happen if there should be an accident.

Erika laughed. *Oh Kei, don't worry. You know how rare it is for anything to happen, it's so much safer to fly than...*

I don't mean that I'm afraid to fly.

Erika wondered if she was having trouble understanding what her cousin was getting at because she was still half asleep. She rubbed at her face in frustration and waited.

I was going to wait until I got back to Tokyo to tell you, said Kei.

Tell me what?

But just now I thought, as I sat here, that if there should be an accident during the flight, and I never made it home, say, then there's some important information I needed to tell you, that I didn't tell you. And I saw a public payphone here so I decided to use up my English change and call you. To tell you.

To tell me what, Kei?

Yesterday afternoon, I started transcribing the next one of Auntie Michiko's diaries. The one where she goes to Okinawa. I would have told you yesterday but I just didn't know what to say. It was a bit too much to take in. She paused.

Tell me.

Eri-chan. Donald isn't your father. It's someone else. Someone American.

Dai Hasshou

*

She had told him, and he had left the house in a rage. It was not often that Donald lost his temper but of course her news was bound to upset him. Michiko had prepared her usual Sunday breakfast for him of fried eggs, toast, sausages, mushrooms and a large pot of tea. She had waited until they had eaten it all, sitting at their tiny table in their single-roomed flat, the baby in the cot; and then she had told him. It was through this one regular routine of cooking a full English breakfast each Sunday that she had held him steady through the first year of their marriage. If it hadn't been for the baby, and for the semblance of care in the cooking of this breakfast, he might have left her months earlier. He knew some of her story, knew of the damage war and her father had inflicted on her, and he was sorry. And so he had made excuses for her behaviour towards him, but still, it had been hard to bear.

Their first few months together had been a blur of excitement; it did not take Michiko long to recover from her heartbreak at having to leave her mother — she sobbed for hours — and the family home she had grown up in. She was euphoric with defiance against her father. Her first international flight had thrilled her beyond anything she had ever experienced and she had bought a sleek ice blue Skyline suitcase with chrome clasps and a new coat especially for the journey. She had never had a passport before, but now she had one, soon to be filled with stamps for London, Paris and Madrid. Before she left she had arranged secretly to meet with her old friend Reiko; she wanted to say goodbye. She asked to meet her at the cocktail bar of the New Otani Hotel and showed her the passport, her smart new clothes and her emerald-set engagement ring. Reiko had been gratifyingly impressed — you look like a movie star, she said, gazing at her passport photo. Reiko had never been inside the New Otani and stared wide-eyed at the sophisticated surroundings and the elegantly dressed clientele, while

Michiko sat back, legs crossed, a cigarette held at the end of her newly manicured fingers, looking perfectly at home.

With her choice of engagement and wedding rings, the wedding dress and going away outfit, Donald's savings were nearly gone. Their first arguments were about money. She would not listen when he insisted that his savings were finite, that they needed money for their trip to England, for the wedding arrangements, and most importantly, for the baby. She would weep whenever he said no to a purchase, saying that she had left her family to be with him, that she was going to have his baby, and that the least he could do would be to let her have whatever trivial little thing it was that she wanted. He would give in.

Once in England, she met his parents in their little Hampshire village home, an elderly couple bewildered by their only son's choice of bride, but they kept their counsel. Instead they welcomed her into their home, helping her with her English, telling her about English customs, taking her to London and showing her the sights. She was charming, and won them over, folding tiny *origami* cranes for them, and singing pretty Japanese folk songs. She was quick to pick up new words and her English soon improved. Their wedding was a civil ceremony, followed by a blessing at their church, which would not allow a non-Christian to be married in a traditional ceremony. There were only a few guests in attendance: some of Donald's aunts, uncles and cousins, his one remaining grandparent, and an old school friend who acted as best man. The wedding meal was a modest one in a small hotel near his parents' home. Michiko did not seem to mind the humble reception; she was in a whirl of excitement at the hotel, its gardens, the food, and she was a delight.

Things began to change after their return to Tokyo. She was irritated by Donald's refusal to move to a bigger apartment — *Don't worry my darling, he pleaded, once my promotion comes we'll find something better* — but no promotion came. His apartment was in a distant suburb and it took nearly an hour to travel into central Tokyo, where she liked to visit the department stores. She was not used to being in the suburbs. The family home, to which she had not yet returned, was in the heart of Tokyo, within walking distance to the

Imperial Palace. She grew increasingly disdainful and impatient, and the longer it took for the promised promotion to materialise, the more she mocked her new husband.

Michiko had suffered from mild morning sickness during the first weeks of her pregnancy, but this soon disappeared. She pestered Donald to let her go to social evenings at the American Club in Tokyo, which they had recently joined. There was no room to invite her new western friends to their home for dinner, which galled her, but she insisted they meet with Donald's colleagues and their wives at restaurants, or over a game of tennis. There was a swimming pool at the Club, and that summer she met her new friends there, the wives of expat businessmen, swimming several days a week. She wore a glamorous ruched turquoise swimsuit that had extra stretch, allowing her bump to grow, and men found it hard to take their eyes off her. But then at six months, she grew too tired and stopped swimming. Soon she found it hard to get out of bed in the mornings, so great was her fatigue. Seeing her pale cheeks and alarmed at her constant visits to the toilet — *It's fine, it's just because I'm drinking more, I'm always so thirsty these days*, she said — Donald booked her in to see her American obstetrician. She had gestational diabetes.

It will most likely go away once you've had the baby, the doctor told her. *But until then you will need to inject insulin.*

She cried, and told Donald that she couldn't possibly inject herself every day with those needles, but in time she learned how to monitor her blood glucose levels, pinching the flesh on her thighs to push in the syringe.

It will all be done with once the baby comes, she said.

The baby came after a long, protracted and painful labour on a cold February night. Michiko tore badly, the obstetrician having had to use forceps. Donald had paced the hospital corridors, listening to his wife's screams. It was a girl, born healthy, with a full head of thick black hair. They had already agreed to call her Erika, a name that was both English and Japanese.

After the baby was born, the diabetes did not go away. Likely she already had the early onset of type two diabetes before the pregnancy, the doctor had said.

You will need to watch what you eat; be careful especially with sugar and white rice – and I'm afraid you will need to inject insulin for the rest of your life.

Michiko was inconsolable, crying in the car as they drove home from the doctor's appointment, the baby on her lap. The baby began to cry too, and when she would not stop, Michiko shook her, shouting — *Shut up! Shut up! It's because of you I have this stupid illness!* and Donald had pulled over and stopped, imploring her please, to stop, it wasn't the baby's fault.

Eventually she came to accommodate it. She was often tired, so whenever he was home, it was Donald who would change nappies, mix up formula and feed the baby. He would bathe her, and at night, whenever Erika cried, Michiko would roll over and nudge Donald awake and plead with him to go to her.

This diabetes makes me tired, she said. I have to look after her all day while you are at work. At night it's your turn.

Donald bore all this with stoicism. Whenever his patience seemed in danger of wearing thin Michiko would cook him his favourite meal, or massage his shoulders, or revert to the charming woman he had first met, and all would be well. But her moods flashed from bad to good like a fast-moving storm and he seldom knew what to expect when he came home.

There was a crèche at the American Club. Once Erika was old enough, Michiko would leave her there for the day and sit poolside, sipping cocktails. She loved her cocktails, though Donald warned her against having so many sugary drinks and alcohol — *It's not good for your diabetes*, he said — to which she responded with contempt. She spent lazy days with her friends. Of these, Marit grew to be her closest. She was tall, blonde, glamorous, married to Lars, who worked at the Norwegian Embassy. She was one of those people who seemed truly interested in others, asking questions about their lives, and listening intently to their

responses. Even Michiko wondered at their unlikely friendship — Marit was kind and gentle, and would pick Erika up and cuddle her from her pram to quieten her if she was crying, in a way Michiko never seemed able to do. She was not interested in clothes, or jewellery, or film stars, yet she patiently listened to Michiko relating the latest gossip she'd read in magazines or talking about what she'd found in the latest sales at Takashimaya Department Store.

When Lars was called back to Oslo for a week's meetings, Marit invited Michiko to bring Erika and come to stay with her. Donald didn't mind — he was relieved to have some peace for a while — and Michiko prepared her suitcase with hers and Erika's things and waited for the embassy chauffeur to pick them up. Marit's and Lars's apartment, paid for by the embassy, was in central Tokyo and so huge that Michiko gaped when she stepped through the front door. In Michiko's quarters there was an enormous European-style bathroom with marble tiles, and a huge, soft bed. They had staff: a cook in the kitchen, a housekeeper who cleaned, a chauffeur. In the evenings Marit and Michiko sat on the sofa together, talking, and Marit began to ask Michiko about her childhood, about her family, about her experience of the war. Her eyes would well with tears at what Michiko told her. Nobody had ever listened to her with such understanding and empathy and Michiko opened like a flower.

Marit, too, had a childhood blighted by war; Oslo had been occupied by the Nazis, and there was a great shortage of food. Her parents and her neighbours had got together to grow vegetables on an allotment near their street, she told Michiko; they had raised rabbits and chickens and had not starved. But her mother and father had both been loving, and even through the darkest days of the occupation, they had never let their children forget how precious they were.

Marit would go and fetch Erika from her cot, and dandle her on her knee, and tell Michiko what a beautiful little girl she had. And Michiko would smile, and feel something stirring inside, something akin to pain. And when Marit offered her a little brandy for the evening, she would gladly take it, and ask for more once she'd emptied her glass. It dulled the ache of the hollowness inside her, helped her deal with the suspicion that something was

missing, the thing that Marit had, that she did not. And she would drink, and feel appeased, and fall asleep on the sofa, and Marit would draw a blanket gently over her, put Erika into her cot, and switch off the lights.

Michiko longed for the next time Lars went away; she loved staying with Marit in the embassy house. But for the moment she was content to meet her at the American Club. Donald would arrive there in the evenings after he finished his work, and Michiko would greet him with warmth, sitting with him, stroking his knee, but once they had to collect Erika from the crèche and return to their tiny apartment her mood would darken.

Michiko started Erika in pre-school when she was two. It was a good way to make sure she got a place in the Montessori kindergarten, she told Donald. It's good for her to socialise with other children. She would drop her off early morning, and head out to the shops, or meet with her sister Fusae who kept their visits secret from their father, then pick her up before Donald returned home. Fusae warned Michiko that their father was still not ready to see her, but if he were to meet Erika, he may come round. Let me see if I can work on him, said Fusae.

I don't care if I never see him again, said Michiko.

But think of Erika, said Fusae, he's her grandfather. She should have a chance to know him.

Their mother was growing increasingly immobile; the injuries she had sustained in the accident had brought on such bad arthritis that she had had to resort to walking sticks — but Fusae managed to bring her out without raising her father's suspicions to see Michiko and Erika. They all met, Fusae, the two boys, Chiyo, Michiko and Erika at a department store restaurant; Michiko imagined she saw a spark of something in her mother's eyes when she was introduced to her granddaughter for the first time. Erika reached out for her grandmother, touching her face. To the women's surprise, Chiyo took the little girl into her arms and cuddled her.

Fusae offered to take Erika off her sister's hands from time to time; the boys would be glad to play with their cousin. It would be good for her to grow up with Japanese children, she said, she should know her roots. And Michiko was glad to be relieved of her.

It was in late August, on a particularly hot Saturday afternoon, that Marit introduced Michiko to an English friend of her husband's who was in Tokyo for a few months. His name was Julian. He had an export business in Hong Kong and had come to Tokyo to open a new branch office. It was doing very well, he told Michiko, winking. *I've just bought this*; and he wriggled his wrist at her. A Rolex. She flirted openly with him and he responded by bringing her gifts: small ones at first — a rose, a bouquet. He loved to see her laugh and would tell her jokes and stories. She hid Erika from him the first few times they met, slipping away to the crèche and heading home without saying goodbye.

But one evening, Julian insisted on taking her out for a meal and wouldn't let her leave without him. She waved her wedding ring at him, told him she couldn't, that she was married, that she had a daughter who had to be collected from the crèche. But it did not stop Julian; the gifts became steadily more generous, more flamboyant. Marit was concerned — *Do watch him, Michiko, he does have a way with women* — but Michiko laughed off her warnings. He was handsome, confident, rich, charming, everything Donald was not. He brought her gifts, he told her stories, he was entertaining. He didn't even seem to mind that she had a child. It did not take long for him to persuade her to leave Erika in the crèche at the club one weekday afternoon and come back to his hotel. And for the weeks that followed, Marit saw Michiko less and less at the club.

Donald finished unexpectedly early at the school one afternoon. He came looking for Michiko, and Marit had to lie and tell him she didn't know where she was, that it was likely she had just popped out to a local department store and that she would be back soon to collect Erika. He had gone home to wait, and when Michiko reappeared, Julian by her side, Marit told her that her husband had come looking for her and that she could no longer play a part in a lie. *You must break it off with Julian, she said, or tell Donald. It's not good to carry on*

with this deception. And Michiko had spoken to Julian, who told her to come back with him to Hong Kong, where he would treat her like a queen.

If you divorce him, darling, he said, I'll marry you. I'll even provide support for Erika.

So Michiko waited until that early autumn morning, that Sunday, after she'd cooked him her customary full English breakfast, to tell him that she was taking Erika and leaving him for Julian. That she would be moving with him to Hong Kong. That Julian was rich, and would pay for a divorce lawyer. And when Donald's disbelief turned to pleading, and then to tears, Michiko felt as if she was looking down at him from afar. She knew there was a place inside her where she should have been feeling pity, or remorse, but was mildly surprised to feel nothing.

Donald's tears turned to anger, and he punched the wall, shouting: *And what about Erika? I will not let you take away my daughter!*

Michiko turned to him with a sad smile. *Donald. Erika is not your child.*

A Birth Certificate

The paper is official, a long, slightly yellowed rectangle, with black letters running across its top reading: BIRTH within the district of the British CONSUL at TOKYO. Below it is a table split into ten columns: Number, When and where born, Name, Sex, Name and surname of father, Name and maiden surname of mother, Rank, profession or occupation of father and claim to citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies, Signature, description and residence of informant, When registered, Signature of consular officer. A green stamp is pasted on the bottom right hand corner, bearing the Queen's head and the words 'Five Shillings', and ring-stamped with the words British Embassy Consular Section of Tokyo, March 1967. Hidden within this official document, embedded within the table, is a lie.

“Fuku Sui Bon Ni Kaerazu”

Spilled water does not return to the tray

*

Erika sat propped against a pillow, watching the ebb and flow of A&E past her open cubicle. From a few doors down she heard shrieks of pain. A voice, wearily patient, said: *Come now, Mrs Harris, please try to keep still.* Grim-faced nurses strode to and fro. A tattered man — drunk or sick — staggered along, slurring: *‘scuse me doctor, ‘scuse me, oi.* The emergency room was chaotic with the usual human detritus of a Friday night. Erika had been waiting for over two hours and she just wanted to get home, but then again, given the circumstances, she wasn’t in a position to complain.

Her phone rang. She fumbled as she answered it with her one free hand and tucked it between her ear and shoulder. *Archie, hi.*

You still at the restaurant? Shall I come round when you’re finished?

I left a while ago. At the moment I’m just...I’ve just got to hang around here for a bit.

What’s that beeping? Where are you?

St. Mary’s A&E.

He shot back immediately: *What’s happened?*

Oh, not much to worry about. I cut my hand at work. I’m waiting to get stitches.

That’s not good. I’ll come to Paddington. I can be there in twenty.

Erika laughed. *Honestly, Archie, don’t worry. I’m fine.*

If you’re in A&E you’re not fine.

It’s just a little cut, it’ll probably only be a couple of stitches. The doctor will be here soon to check it out. I’ll call you when I get home. It’ll be a nightmare parking around here, anyway. She looked down. Blood was seeping between the fingers of her right hand as she squeezed the left, which was wrapped in a soaking bandage. She held it a little tighter and

raised her arm. A drop fell onto the sheet, bloomed into a crimson flower. Someone in the corridor began shouting.

I'm coming now. You're not getting the Tube home. Okay? I'll come and pick you up. Leave me to worry about parking. Don't leave before I get there.

I don't think I'll be leaving for a while. They're too busy treating gunshot wounds and stabbings.

She was tired enough to drift off, despite the pain, and the surrounding chaos. She woke with a start. Her phone was ringing again. Sarah. Erika left smears of blood on the answer key as she picked up with her one hand. The blossom grew into a scarlet bouquet on the sheet.

Are you alright? I'm sorry, I would have come with you, it looked pretty bad, but they couldn't spare me — it was a full house tonight. I'd come now but I've got to get back for the babysitter. What's the doctor say?

Haven't seen one yet. The nurse says I'll need stitches. Archie's coming soon. And the cab got me here fine. She laughed. The driver freaked when he saw the blood. I had to promise I'd pay for cleaning if I got any on the seats. Funny.

There was a pause on the end of the line. *Hilarious. Listen, Erika, what happened with you tonight?*

I cut myself.

Yeah, obviously, but how?

With my knife.

But it's not like you're a novice, is it?

The throbbing in Erika's left hand was intense; she felt her body rocking in time with its pulsing. The pain radiated up her arm. She felt dizzy. She wondered if she should ask for painkillers.

Erika? Are you there?

I'll call you tomorrow. I don't feel up to talking much right now.

Erika?

Yeah?

We were talking about it after service, and Frankie said something... she trailed off.

Said what?

Never mind. I'll talk to you later. Archie's definitely coming, right?

Yep.

All right. Please take care of yourself. I'm worried about you.

Don't be.

Kiss kiss. She hung up.

Her head lolled against the car seat as they took off along Praed Street. Her hand was wrapped tightly in a clean bandage and the Tramadol had seen to the pain, for now. She closed her eyes.

Thanks for coming to get me, she said.

The nurse told me they wouldn't have let you go home on your own anyway, with those painkillers and all the blood you've lost. All you're good for is a cup of tea and bed. I guess I'll have to drink this bottle of wine by myself.

The car fed into the traffic flowing past Paddington Station, and the stopping and starting made her nauseous. She opened her eyes again, fixed them on the road ahead. It had started to rain, and the shining black of the road reflected the lights from Queensway and Westbourne Grove, the bus in front of them paving their way with ruby lights. She rested her heavy head on the window, fogging the glass with her breath; she wiped a hole in it so she could see. If she could see she wouldn't get sick. The pills had made her so groggy.

Sarah rang me earlier. She said it looked like you cut yourself on purpose.

Erika kept her head on the window, misting up the clear patch with her breath again. The reflection of all the lights made the filthy puddles in the road so pretty.

Erika.

She carried on staring at the road. Her head was empty.

Erika!

She cleared her throat. *My head's foggy. I'm sorry.* She wanted to lift her head, but couldn't.

Did you do it though? On purpose? Just tell me, yes or no.

I don't know.

How can you not know?

Erika stayed silent.

He shot through an amber light just as it turned red. A car horn blared.

I care about you, Erika,

I know. I'm sorry.

Jesus Christ, Erika.

Please. We'll talk tomorrow, okay?

Archie drove on in silence. When Erika looked over at him, his eyes were fixed on the road and he was biting his lip. Her stomach dipped and she blinked back tears. He was so good to her. What was she doing? She reached her hand out to touch his hair but retracted it when he turned to look at her.

As soon as she finished the tea Archie had made her, Erika went to bed and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. The painkillers knocked her out for a solid nine hours. When she woke, Archie was spreadeagled across most of the bed. She slipped out slowly from under the sheets so as not to wake him. She stood over him a while, watching him sleep.

She was in the kitchen breaking eggs into a bowl with her one hand when Archie came and stood in the doorway, rubbing at his crumpled, stubbly face.

Morning. He kissed her. One handed breakfast prep with Captain Hook. Here, let me help. He started to take the bowl from her, but she held it tight.

I want to make you breakfast. Let me, she said.

The state you're in, I should be making breakfast for you. Come on, hand it over.

No. She screwed up her face at him. *I'm doing it.*

Seriously, Erika, you need to give it a rest.

Put the coffee on, then. But I want to make you breakfast. It's the least I can do after last night.

Archie filled the coffee machine. *There's something more important you can do for me. You can tell me what's going on with you.*

And after the coffee's done you could help me chop the herbs. I can't quite manage...

She passed him the chopping board and knife. She whisked the eggs, cut some butter into the pan and waited until it began to fizz. Archie switched on the coffee grinder and she was grateful for its gritty whine, which filled the silence. When it stopped the kitchen seemed quieter than before.

Well? said Archie, tamping the grinder's contents into the filter and switching on the machine. He took the knife and started chopping herbs with great concentration.

Erika poured the egg into the pan, beating at it with a spoon. *I'll need those in a second.*

Erika. He put down the knife, turning to her, chopping board in hand. *Stop ignoring me.*

She took the board from him and brushed the herbs into the eggs. She whisked hard, added another knob of butter.

The toast — please could you put on a couple of slices? she asked.

You're starting to piss me off.

Erika turned off the gas and looked at him. She wanted to go back to bed. But the emotion in his face kept her standing there. It hurt her to see his face so full of concern. She

took his hand. *I'll try to talk to you about it, but let's have breakfast first. I'm not sure what's going on myself.*

So you did cut yourself on purpose.

Archie, please. Please let's have breakfast first, and coffee, and then we'll talk about it. Let me figure things out for a bit.

The rain had cleared up overnight and the autumn sunlight set the colours in the room alight. There was a glint from the alcove. The sun was illuminating the gold leaf on Michiko's tablet with its low sweep. She stood contemplating this for a while before sweeping piles of newspapers and books out of the way on the dining table with her elbow, plonking the saucepan of scrambled eggs on a magazine. Archie buttered Erika's hot toast for her and she scooped the creamy golden eggs with a spoon onto each of their plates.

They ate in silence. It was comforting, like a cocoon. But Erika was growing too big for it. She couldn't see a way to stay there. She was going to have to break out of it soon. Toast and eggs finished, Archie leaned back, his cup of coffee in his hand, and waited. She kept eating, her head down, holding her injured hand in her lap under the table.

How's it feeling? Does it hurt? he asked, at last.

A bit, she mumbled. *I might have another painkiller in a bit.*

More coffee? asked Archie.

Yes, please.

He disappeared into the kitchen with their cups. She heard coffee grinding, the steam kissing the milk. She expanded herself into each sound landscape, filling each moment, weighing each one down so it might keep her safe for as long as possible.

Archie brought the cups back through and walked to the sofa, gesturing at her with his head to follow. *Come on,* he said, *come and sit next to me.* The soft expression on his face made her eyes sting. She swallowed hard. She took a deep breath.

Right, she said, dropping onto the sofa beside him. She held the cup of coffee, took a few sips, hiding behind it. Then she heard her voice making tiny reverberations in the cup.

I can't lie to you. It wasn't an accident.

Thought so, said Archie.

But I honestly didn't mean to do it; I didn't plan to. I just felt like I had to, really suddenly, right before I did it.

Archie waited, looking at her.

I was boning quail. I was looking at these little birds, all tiny and naked and plucked, you know, and it got to me, seeing them there.

Go on.

I don't know Archie, I wasn't thinking anything when I did it. I don't when I'm cooking. So I'm not sure I could tell you what I was thinking.

Try. Just tell me exactly what happened.

She cradled the cup in her hands, the bandaged one massive and cumbersome. She breathed steady and long, so as to keep everything inside from spilling over.

So, I was boning the quail. There were about twenty of them. I had a pile of them to my left, plucked ones, heads intact, ready for deboning. And I'd just finished one and put it in the tray to my right, with the ones I'd done already. And when I reached over to get another quail from the pile, when I put it down on the chopping board, ready to get to work on it, somehow my hand looked like one of the deboned quails. And I guess I saw how the dead quail doesn't feel anything anymore. Maybe I wondered what it would feel like to cut into my hand. It was all in a split second. I had my hand flat on the chopping board and I cut it, just like that.

Which bit did you cut? said Archie.

She pointed a diagonal line on the flesh between her thumb and forefinger.

Christ, Erika, there's ligaments and arteries in there! What did the doctor say?

I cut through an artery. That's why I lost a lot of blood. And I've cut through some nerves... She trailed off.

Jesus.

They've stitched it. It's fixed. So I've lost a bit of sensation in my thumb and forefinger but some of it might come back. It just needs time to heal and then they'll give me physio. It'll be all right.

Will it? And what does this mean for work?

Oh, I'll go back on Monday, honestly, it'll be fine.'

You just said they told you it needs time to heal.

But it's in a splint so my thumb stays steady.

Really, Erika, you're acting nuts. He got up off the sofa. Her heart leapt.

Please Archie, I can understand why you might be angry. I..I need to think about all of this.

Yeah. Me too, he said.

I honestly don't understand where the urge came from. I know it seems crazy. But I'm not one of these people that cuts themselves because they're messed up, you know, self-harming.

Archie sat back down again. No. But what's brought this on? You were sad to see Kei leave, but surely it can't be that, he said. I don't know what to think. It's freaked me out, that's all. You've never done anything...weird like this before.

Erika held her breath, said nothing.

They're freaked out at work, too. Frankie saw you do it and told everyone. André knows. Sarah said to tell you that he wanted you to call him on Monday. He wants to talk to you.

Oh god.

Do you blame him? said Archie. Look, they asked me at the hospital whether I thought it was an accident. They said it was an unusual place for a chef to cut by mistake. I told them I was sure it was. An accident, I mean. But I'm trying to understand. You've been in such a good mood this week. Everything went so well with Kei. Are you really so upset about her leaving that you'd do this?

Erika coiled into herself, pushing herself deep into the sofa. *Actually, something happened.*

What, with Kei?

She phoned me from the airport just before she got on the plane. About something she read in Michiko's diaries. Something mind-blowing. Would you mind making me another cup of coffee? Then I'll tell you. I'm not sure that's why I felt the compulsion to cut my hand, but who knows. The mind does funny things. And could you grab me a Tramadol while you're up?

Archie stayed with her the whole weekend. He had been as shocked as she had been at the news.

Did you have any idea? Any at all?

None. I always thought Donald was my father. No wonder he never got in touch. He must have found out.

Half American. Wow. Did Kei say there was a name?

Only a first name: Michael. He was a US Marine stationed in Okinawa.

Archie jumped up and walked to the Korean cabinet. He slid out the secret panel and pulled open the drawer.

Oh my god, said Erika. It's his.

West Point. Makes sense now. He passed it to her.

My father's ring. She stared at it in her hand.

Did the diary say what happened to him?

Only that she had to leave Okinawa to go back to Tokyo, and that she was heartbroken to leave him behind. Kei said she flicked through as much of the rest of the diary as she could to find out what happened. Seems she wrote letter after letter but never got a reply. Kei says she'll read through the rest of the diaries to see if she can find more information.

He trained at West Point, Class of '59. I bet you could find a graduation list and check out all the Michaels on it. They might even have an alumni list; you could write them a letter and ask them to forward it on.

What, a letter to all the Michaels saying, hello, if you fucked a Japanese woman called Michiko in 1966, I may be your daughter?

Come on.

I'm furious. I can't believe she never told me.

People have their reasons. Maybe she just never got around to telling you before she died.

When someone's going to kill themselves and they have important information that would die with them, they tend to leave a note.

But you always said it wasn't certain she did.

Oh, she did, alright. She injected herself with all the insulin she had in the house.

That's not an accident.

He put his arm around her. Did she leave a note?

No. The bitch. Selfish to the last.

Oh, honey. People do inexplicable things when they're in emotional pain. He pointed to her hand. Right?

She crumpled. He waited for the rasping sobs to quieten, rubbing at her back, before he said: I think I understand. It freaks me out, but I understand. There's been a lot for you to take in and I know you have a bit of a history with your mother.

She blew her nose. I wasn't thinking about any of this when I did it, though.

Like you said, the mind does funny things. Maybe you should see someone. A counsellor or something. I'm sure the GP could get you a referral. I'll come with you.

No.

It might help you to talk about things with someone professional.

They'll just try to put me on antidepressants and drag out all the crap about my childhood. I don't want to go back there. Look, I'll get over it. It's just the shock of the news.

It's not a matter of 'getting over it', babe. The bits and pieces you've told me about your mother...they're not normal.

What's normal? Honestly, please, leave it alone. She felt nauseous from the Tramadol.

It doesn't help that you work too hard in that kitchen. I've never seen you as relaxed as you were last weekend, with Kei still here. If you won't see a counsellor then maybe you should just take a break from things.

I've only just had one.

You're not going to be able to do much with that hand. Why don't you talk about it to André on Monday?

Erika took another sip of her coffee. It wasn't such a bad idea. Her mind began to race. What about Mrs Mackenzie? Maybe she could cook several weeks' worth of food and stash it all in her freezer, and Sarah could be persuaded to buy fruit and vegetables for her once a week, and spend a little time with her, even bring Luca. Mrs Mac would like that.

She felt she needed to see Kei again, straight away, to see the diaries, to find out more. She had a decent amount of money put away in a savings account. She could book herself onto a flight, as soon as next week, even. She hadn't been back to Japan for so long. It would be good to see Kōsuke again; she'd never met his children. She could go to Okinawa too; she had never met her grandmother's family; maybe they knew something. She could find out which military base her father had been stationed at. Who knows, he might even still be there. Either way she felt she needed to do something, urgently. She was worried that if she carried on as she was she would only bring herself — and Archie — to harm.

On Sunday, Sarah came with Luca. Erika had told her the news over the phone and she insisted she had to see her the next day, when she wasn't working.

Hey, she said, opening the door, and Luca shot past his mother and suckered himself onto Erika like an octopus, wrapping his arms round her thighs and squeezing hard. *Hello sweetie*, she said, tousling his hair with her undamaged hand. *Hi Sarah*.

Sarah strode forward in imitation of her son, squeezing the breath out of her with an enormous hug. She planted a kiss on each cheek, then picked up Erika's arm and examined her hand, tutting. *Man, you are one crazy chick. How many stitches?*

Fourteen.

Christ. What do you think about all this, Arch? she said, giving him a kiss.

I reckon she needs a holiday. She's had a lot to deal with.

Good idea. She dangled a heavy paper bag in front of Erika's face. *Right then. We're having a picnic in your lounge.*

Hooray! A picnic! said Luca, swinging his legs as he perched on the edge of the sofa. *Can I watch telly?*

Erika switched it on. *Spongebob Squarepants* was on CBBC.

What's that on your hand? he asked.

It's a bandage.

What for?

I cut it, she said

Was there lots of blood?

Yes, quite a lot.

Can I see?

She held out her hand and he examined it from all angles.

It's all covered up, he said.

To protect it while it heals. The doctor stitched it up so the cut bit could hold together.

He grimaced. *Did it hurt?*

A bit. But it's getting better.

Luca seemed satisfied with this answer and threw himself back onto the cushions, drawing up his knees and peering out over them at the TV screen. She watched him, the moving figures reflected in his eyes, wondering at how children were born carrying this bubble of honesty and innocence inside them, something clean and pure, until life pricked at it. She wondered if she had been like that, once.

Archie dragged the coffee table to one side and Sarah laid the red chequered picnic rug she'd brought with her on the floor. There was a lot of food; there wasn't much room left on the rug for anyone to sit on. Erika arranged four cushions around it. Sarah insisted they all tie big white napkins around their necks. Luca thought this was very funny. Semi-recumbent, like Romans at a banquet, they tore hunks off an enormous crusty cob and used them to scoop up toasted wheat berry salad, roast artichoke hearts, chargrilled forest mushrooms and creamy goat curd. The food was delicious, clean, uncomplicated. The climax to their feast lay in a sparkling display, the centrepiece to their deluxe picnic: a pile of pillow-like meringues studded with pistachios and candied violets. A bowl of clotted cream lay alongside.

Archie joshed with Luca, while Sarah told Erika about her sister's latest affair of the heart, bemoaned her own lack of a man, gave a rambling synopsis of a book she had just read. She reached for a giant meringue and glanced at Erika. *You're very quiet sweetheart.* She reached out and squeezed Erika's shoulder. *If you want to talk about it, go ahead.*

I don't know where to start.

Archie was tussling with Luca, tickling him, but Erika could tell he was listening.

My mother... Her eyes welled.

Sarah waited. Archie stopped tickling Luca and came to sit beside Erika on the sofa.

I didn't want to do this. Look, there's just too much to deal with at once. I'd not given these things much thought until recently. It's just that Kei's visit...

Kei's visit ended up being perfect, said Archie. Didn't it?

It was so much better than I thought it would be. But it made me think about things I hadn't thought about before. And then, this. You know, the news about my father.

Sarah bit into her meringue. *Go on.*

I did something terrible.

It was a bit freaky, but it's going to heal. And you've explained it. I understand now, said Archie. I think Sarah understands, too. Don't you Sarah?

Sarah nodded.

I don't mean the cut. I mean... to my mother. She was so messed up. She had a terrible childhood, growing up during the war. Their house was bombed. They all nearly starved. Her mother had an accident and lost her marbles, became permanently disabled. And her father beat her. And eventually he disowned her for marrying an Englishman. She never saw him again. So she drank too much. And she was a diabetic. She wasn't good at looking after herself. It was like she didn't give a shit. And she had the most terrible relationship with my stepfather, fighting all the time, physical fights sometimes, throwing and smashing things. And she wasn't much of a mother. Most of the time she left me with other people. She even forgot me in a shopping centre once, and the police had to be called to find her.

Oh god, Erika, said Sarah.

But now I realise she was drinking because she was damaged. And sad. And this thing about my father; well, I have to know if she loved him. If he loved her. And why he didn't write back to her or stay in touch. Or if he even knew about me. But back then I was angry with her all the time. She'd treated me horribly ever since I could remember. When I became a teenager I thought she was a complete bitch. And then, when Julian abandoned her, and she followed him to London, taking me with her, she was livid at first. Took her rage out on me. Then once she realised he wasn't coming back, the fire went out of her. She was drinking more and more. She became an alcoholic. She paused for a sip of water.

Christ, Erika, said Archie. I knew you and your mother had a tricky relationship, but this...

She became really needy. She wanted me to be with her all the time. I kept trying to fix things up for her. I found an AA meeting near where she lived. But she wouldn't go. All she did was get pissed and pass out and send her insulin levels rocketing. I had to keep cleaning up her mess, over and over. I went with her to the doctor and he told me that unless she controlled her drinking she was going to have problems with her feet — her circulation was terrible — and her eyesight. But still she continued to drink, and complain, and take her fury out on me. And because she'd been such a shit to me when I was a kid, I thought, why the fuck should I hang around her, moping and drinking and whingeing all the time, being miserable, now that she needs me? I was cruel to her sometimes.

Oh honey, it's understandable, said Sarah. I'd have been the same.

But this is the worst bit. The one thing she did for me, whenever she was sober, was cook. She was a great cook.

So that's where you get it from, said Archie.

She loved to eat. And she loved to cook for me. It was weird; even when I was a little kid and she was so cold and distant, she made sure she cooked up a decent, home cooked Japanese meal and sat with me while I ate it. And the night she died, she called me and asked me to come over and eat with her. She sounded sober, said she'd cook something special for me. But I forgot.

Forgot?

Well, sort of forgot. I'd only spoken to her that morning, so it was in the back of my mind, but she'd been really difficult the day before, and I was angry, and I went out. The next morning I realised what I'd done and I rang her. I felt pretty bad. But she didn't pick up. Erika closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Sorry, I feel a bit queasy. I think it's all that food after the painkillers.

Honey, you don't have to tell this story now, said Sarah, stricken.

No, no. I have to tell you. I've never told this to anyone. Not even the police, you know, when they did their routine checks, asking lots of questions. I just told them that I'd been trying to get in touch with her since that morning, that she was a depressive, and an alcoholic, and, obviously, a diabetic. Erika swallowed, breathed, sipped more water. Anyway, I tried and tried to phone and she wouldn't pick up. When she still hadn't answered the phone by the next evening, I went in there after I finished work. I had a spare key. I had to use it pretty often, to get in when she got drunk and made a mess. I thought it would be the same thing again. But I found her, dead, in bed. There were at least a dozen empty insulin bottles on the table beside her. And in the kitchen the food was all laid out ready on the table. The rice cooker was still on.

Fuck. Sarah was crying.

She wouldn't have done it if I'd just gone round for dinner. Erika's face crumpled. She tried to hold it in, for Luca's sake — he had turned from the TV and was watching her, alarmed — but she could not. Archie wrapped her in his arms. She buried her face in his chest, and she howled.

PART 2

Hiji-ōtaki, Kunigami-son

Tuesday, 2nd December

It was hard, telling Archie I needed to make this trip alone. He was disappointed. I told him we could come together another time, but I had to come on my own, this first time.

Since I made the decision to come to Okinawa, we've been together pretty much the whole time. And while that's nice, I feel a bit restricted. His constant presence makes me feel as though there's a wall between me and whatever it is I have to experience here. I don't know how to explain it to him.

There's been a lot to take in over the last couple of months. In some ways I wish I'd come to Okinawa by myself, but part of me was too scared to do it without him, in case I found out upsetting things and fell apart. It's selfish, I know. But he really wanted to come, and after Kei's visit, and my little 'accident', I thought, why the hell not. I enjoy his company.

Even though he was disappointed, he understood about me wanting to be alone today. He's going to explore Naha, go to the Prefectural Museum, and find a nice restaurant for us to eat in tonight. He's been so good to me, and I felt bad about it, but I had no choice. Especially since my time with the Noro.

I'm perched on a big rock, writing in this new notebook, alone in the wilderness, the sound of this magnificent waterfall filling my ears. I'm sitting on my fleece, but I can feel the chill of the boulder seeping into my backside. Even in December, Okinawa's warmer than Tokyo. By the time I got off the bus this morning, the sun was out, and walking from Kunigami village towards the Yambaru mountains it was lovely and hot. But the higher I climbed, the colder it got. I'm glad I listened to the Noro and brought my jacket.

I don't know why I never got back to keeping a journal. Maybe I didn't need to order my thoughts as much as I do now. I didn't even plan to start one until I found this notebook

in the Okinawan folk craft shop in Naha. I love the fabric covering it; the colours are the bright turquoise and emerald of the Okinawan sea. I've never seen sea this colour before. I think it's the whiteness of the dead coral, their bones, I suppose, ground up and bleached, shining through the water and turning it into that dazzling blue.

I used to keep a diary, but Mum (weird — I'm writing 'Mum' instead of 'Michiko') discovered it, and read it; it was during my angry teenage years, and I'd written lots of vicious things about her and Julian. She threw it out and by the time I realised it was missing, and she'd stopped sulking and told me what she'd done, the rubbish truck had been and gone. I shouted at her. After that I didn't bother with a journal.

It feels right to sit here, writing. I want to stay here as long as I can, taking all this nature in, getting all the jumbled thoughts in my head organised on paper.

Kei met us at Narita. It was great to see her again, and felt so different from when I met her at Heathrow back in August. The last time I went to Tokyo, nobody met me at the airport and I had to make my way into the city on my own. This time she came all the way out on the train to meet us. We hugged, and the other people waiting in the Arrivals hall really stared at us. We talked all the way back, avoiding the subject of Mum's diaries, or my father, or what I'm going to do about tracking him down. It didn't feel private enough on the train.

We didn't talk about it until a few days later, after we'd been out for a big family feast at the local Chinese restaurant. Fusae obachan was there — she cried when she saw me, saying how much she missed Mum — and Reiko obachan, who cried too, and squeezed my hand for ages, and told me how much I looked like her. Reiko obachan's a widow now — Kanagawa-san died last year of cancer, and her daughter's moved to America with her new husband since then. She said she was lonely. Poor Reiko obachan. It's sad her daughter left her behind in Japan. She's such a nice person. I didn't see much of her after Mum and I moved to Hong Kong, but I always felt close to her. She's the only person left now, apart from Fusae obachan, who knew Mum from the beginning, before things started to go wrong.

Sanae and Ryū are great kids. Lively and funny. Mayumi obachan clearly loves having grandchildren, and spends a lot of time with them, which is good. It was hard when Ken ojichan died. I guess Sanae and Ryū are my second cousins? I'm like their auntie, which is nice, since I don't have nieces or nephews. It surprised me that they knew all about me, even though I'd never met them before. It felt as though I've always known them. It strange to see Kō-chan being a dad. All my memories of him are as a snotty little kid, and of us playing together. I haven't spoken to him as much as I have to Kei over the years — and god knows, it wasn't as if I was speaking much to her, either — and since Ken-ojichan died, he's been absorbed with the family business. He's a nice, quiet guy. I like Kayoko-san, too. She gets on well with Mayumi obachan, so no mother-in-law issues there. Running the tea business with Kō-chan and looking after the kids must be exhausting. Sanae and Ryū are good kids, but at six and eight, how else can they be but boisterous sometimes? I can see why Kayoko san gets angry with them, when she's tired and they won't listen, or when they won't eat their food that she takes a lot of effort to make. Watching her, I realise being a mum is pretty hard work.

My hand's hurting from writing. I've just looked back and seen how many pages I've already written and there's more to write. The sound of the waterfall is like white noise, like it's lulling these words out of me, as if it's putting me into some kind of trance. I've just looked at the time and I'm shocked to see I've been sitting up here for over an hour already.

My hand's healing. It was a bit mad, all that, I still can't figure it out. I'll have a scar to remind me of that madness. I should have taken a break after Kei left, especially after the news about my father. It didn't sink in properly at the time. Maybe something in me made me do that to myself so I'd be forced to stop work for a while. But I did it without thinking about any of that. It was weird. Everyone knew I'd done it on purpose, and I thought André would go mental at me, but he was so nice about it he almost made me cry. Maybe Sarah talked to him. Anyway, he said to take the time off I needed, that I'd been working bloody

hard over the years and that any time I wanted to come back, there'd be a place for me, and he'd find a temporary sous-chef until I came back.

Something changed in me after Kei left. I didn't care so much about work any more. All that pressure and the go-go-go of the kitchen had been a way of getting through the days without having to think too much about things. But thinking about things is what I'm going to have to do.

I still haven't worked out what to do with Mum's bones. I came here to find the answer. I even asked the Noro what to do. She said Mum's bones needed to go into the ancestral tomb of her husband's family. When I explained why that couldn't happen, she said the next best thing was for the bone remnants to be put back together with the rest in the family ancestral grave. Doing that would cost a fortune — money I don't have — and even if I did, I don't want to ask Kei and Kō to go through the palaver of a ceremony. It's their ancestral grave, after all, not mine. The Noro said it would have been best if the remains hadn't been split. I explained that Ken-ojichan asked for special dispensation from the oterasan to put a few fragments into an urn for me to keep so I wouldn't be lonely.

Ken-ojichan took on the duty of a husband when Mum died. I had no savings at the time, so he took care of everything. He cared so much about Mum. At the time I was too messed up with grief for it to sink in. Now he's gone, it's too late to tell him how grateful I was and how much I cared about him. I can't bear to think how I didn't make it to Tokyo to see him once I heard he was sick. I was in denial; I didn't want to think of him dying, and I just hoped...

That bit was meant to say, 'the whole thing would go away'. Tear blot in the wrong spot, shouldn't have wiped it, should have let it dry, made a big smear.

Anyway. So the Noro told me I should keep the urn and ancestral tablet in a special place in the home, and honour Mum by offering incense and water, and put my hands together in respect and gratitude every day. I told her I was doing that. Well, that's half true. Since Kei

left, I've kept the altar tidy and dusted, and I give incense and water every day. I'm still angry with her, but I'm trying to understand. I don't think she was always such a mess. I've been reading about what happened to people in Tokyo during the war. Mum refused to talk about it, but Fusae-obachan told me their house was bombed, that loads of people died, that they'd seen lots of dead bodies and horror, and that they were always on the brink of starvation. Fusae-obachan didn't say anything about my grandfather, though I really wanted to know what he was like. That, Mum did talk about. She told me about the sadistic things he did to her. She said that when she heard he'd died in agony of pancreatic cancer, she danced for joy. At the time I thought, wow, what a bitch, but now I think he must have done terrible things for her to say that. As I say, I'm trying to understand. I'll ask Kei to work on some of the earlier diaries, the ones Mum kept at the very beginning, when she was young.

I miss her. It's only now I'm letting myself feel that. Now I realise that if I loved anybody at all, it was Mum. It surprises me to see myself write that. But to be able to write that despite all the things she did, I really must have loved her. I don't know if it's wishful thinking, but I believe she loved me too, in her damaged way. I believe it because of the way she cooked for me.

It's strange how I tolerated the things she did, thinking her horrible behaviour was because of me. I thought that if I'd been a better child, she could have shown me that love. But it was nothing to do with me. She needed help. It was after Julian left and there wasn't anyone to hide behind any more that her damaged self was truly exposed. I couldn't deal with it, not back then. If she were still alive I'm not sure it would be any different. It's as if, by dying, she released me so I could see things more clearly.

It's taken me a long time to get to this place.

I wonder what happened to Marit? I remember Mum being furious with her for something, saying she never wanted to see her again. After she read a letter Marit had sent her, she did her insane, violent, flipping-out-like-a-crazy-woman thing, screaming 'shinē, kono ama!' over and over again. She smashed a whole bunch of stuff, plates, vases. She tried

throwing a paperweight through the window, and when I held her back, she bit my arm and drew blood. I missed school that day to make sure she didn't do any more damage to the house, or to herself. I tried to read the letter but she ripped it into tiny pieces. Even after she calmed down, Mum wouldn't talk about it. I was sad Marit stopped being in our lives. She'd always been kind to me. She'd been my protector and after she stopped being around things got a lot worse. I wonder if the diaries will say something about that letter. Mum's alcoholism had escalated around that time, though, so she might have stopped writing by then.

I didn't intend to spend all this time scribbling, but now I've started, I realise how much I need to get all this out of my head. I can't think of a better place to do it, surrounded by mountains and forest, alone. This waterfall's soothing and powerful and I feel like it's pinning me here with its force, not letting me leave. It's not the kind of place where you take just take some snaps and walk away. It commands attention.

Writing like this makes me feel self-centred. I realise I don't have room for anybody else in my life, or the energy to give to other people — at least, not for the moment. I feel bad for Archie — I know he wants us to get married and have kids, but I'm not in the right place. I'm not sure I'll ever be.

I just went for a pee. I hid, just in case anyone showed up, it was easy — everywhere you look, it's thick with lush green. It felt nice, peeing in the open, the ferns tickling my bum. I stared at the waterfall for ages after I'd finished, staying put until my legs started going to sleep. I wondered — how long has it been flowing like that, the water going on, and on, and on? I zoned out, watching this one massive thing, this single entity, but knowing that every millisecond I was looking at it, it was changing, changing, changing. I thought: one second ago, that waterfall was a completely different one to the one I'm looking at now. Is it A

Waterfall, a single thing? It's so fluid, changing all the time, so impossible to grasp. It started to do my head in a bit — I worry I'm losing my grip on reality these days — and I felt I wasn't connected to the ground any more, and almost toppled over.

Anyway, I'm back on my rock. I haven't even started writing about the Noro. Where do I start?

I don't remember when I first found out what a Noro was. Somehow I always knew about these Okinawan shaman-priestesses. I must have learned about it at school. I did more research once I decided to come here, though, and learned some interesting things. They used to be consulted by the Ryūkyū kings, and they're almost all women, passing their power down along the maternal bloodline. They're like live wires, passing on what they understand from unseen powers to people in their community, officiating in rituals to keep harmony between the living, the dead, and the spirits of the elements. They've often suffered some sort of trauma in their lives — maybe that makes them wiser — and are seen by outsiders as a little crazy. They went underground for a long time, because the Yamato government tried to stamp them out. Not any more though. I'm surprised I haven't seen any up here, quietly giving offerings like I've seen them do in other parts of the island, sitting cross-legged in front of big trees, big rocks or the sea with a tray of rice and oranges and green leaves and salt, sometimes wearing plain white robes, sometimes in ordinary clothes. They put their hands together as if they're praying, their lips moving. It makes me think of paganism and druids in England, where people communed with the elemental gods and goddesses they saw in nature. Maybe it's because so many of us have lost that kind of connection that there's so much wrong with the world. Maybe that was what was wrong with Mum. She had this strange forcefulness in her, a power that wasn't harnessed properly — maybe because of the traumas she'd lived through — and it turned round and strangled her.

The Noro I met is called Tokashiki Michiko — it's weird she has the same name as Mum. She lives in Nago, though she's originally from Kōrijima. After this I'm walking back

to Kunigami and getting the bus back to Nago. She asked to see me a second time. She said there were things she needed to do with me.

I tried to make an appointment with another Noro before I left London. I called a number Kei gave me for someone connected to Obāchan's family. This Noro was supposed to be living on a small island called Kudakajima, a couple of hours away from Naha. I hoped she might be able to tell me more about Obāchan and Mum. Kei never met her, but said Mum visited the Noro when she came to Okinawa with Obāchan, to see if she could heal Obāchan's injuries from the car accident. She wrote about it in her diary. I thought the Noro might have information about my father. Maybe Mum mentioned something.

I was so disappointed when I rang the number and an automatic recording said the number was no longer in use. Kei said she'd be nearly a hundred years old now, but that's nothing in Okinawa, so I thought there'd be a chance she was still alive. I guess not. It wasn't so unlikely — the whole world wants to know the secret of Okinawan longevity. You see lively people in their eighties and nineties, digging their vegetable plots. They stay active, spend lots of time outdoors and eat a healthy diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables — that's probably why. And there's a strong sense of community here. The oldies hang out with the little ones all the time. Lots of community events, festivals, lots of dancing, lots of music. People don't seem to get stressed the way they do in Tokyo or London.

There's music everywhere in Okinawa. People practise the Sanshin while they're sitting in parked cars, behind shop counters or on park benches. When I hear it all the hairs stand up on the back of my neck and I get such a sense of longing my chest hurts, as if this music's been inside me since forever and now it wants to pop out. Even though I'd never been to Okinawa before, as soon as I arrived it felt like home. Maybe it's knowing that I'm quarter Okinawan. I get this strange sensation, a kind of buzzing, as if my blood's recharging itself through the rocks, the trees and the sea. For the first time I feel truly alive. I'm getting strength from these natural surroundings, like a vital force. Maybe that's why people live so long here, because they're connected to nature. London seems a long way away.

I thought I heard voices then. I sat for a while looking at the track winding up through the trees but there's nobody there. Must have imagined it. How come nobody's walking up here?

Anyway, the Noro. So I arrived in Naha resigned to the fact that I wasn't going to get my consultation. Apart from going to the American military base to look at the archives, I wasn't going to have the chance to find out much about Obāchan, or Mum, or her relationship with my father. Sometimes when I got chatting to people I'd ask them what they knew about Noro. Some didn't want to talk about it, especially older people who'd go, *hmm, Noro...* then change the subject. Younger people I spoke to about it said they'd never met any, and had no idea what it was like to have an appointment with one.

An older woman I met in the Makishi market teashop told me about Kudakajima. When I first saw her, I couldn't stop staring. She had long, black, shiny hair with a single streak of white, and wore it up in a bun with an old-looking silver pin. She was beautiful in a masculine way with thick dark eyebrows and dark skin, and didn't wear make up. Everything about her was...earthy. That's the word. Earthy. She reminded me of the photo I have of Obāchan, the one where everyone says how Okinawan she looks.

I was so embarrassed when she noticed me staring. I said I was admiring her dress. It really was beautiful. The fabric was so fine you could see through it to her tunic underneath; light charcoal and patterned with tiny squares of black and white. She said it was hand-woven *bashōfu*, made from banana plant fibres, coloured with natural dyes. She didn't smile much and looked straight into my eyes in a way that made me nervous, so I asked about her hairpin. She said it was made by a traditional Naha silversmith. She still had her eyes fixed on me, but didn't say anything. So then I asked about whether she was from Naha. She said no, and by then she'd picked up her order of tea and was heading for a table, so I thought that was that.

I got my *buku-bukucha* and headed for the counter, and was really surprised when she gestured for me to join her. I don't know why, but my heart beat faster. She asked how long

I was staying in Okinawa, where I planned to go. When I said I wanted to go to Kudakajima, she said “It’s not easy to get to.” I pulled the ferry schedule out my bag, and she almost looked angry. She said “It’s nothing to do with the ferry. You go when you’re called to go.” I asked her what she meant and she didn’t say anything for ages, and sipped her tea. I wondered whether I should go sit by myself at the counter, when she said, “Okinawans never choose to go to Kudakajima.” She said it’s not the kind of place you just go to for a holiday. It’s a sacred island, there’s nothing on there except a few houses, a shop and a school, and that there are lots of secret places which outsiders are forbidden from entering. That’s all she said. She drank up her tea, said goodbye and left. I looked up more later. The legend says the goddess Amariyū and the god Shinerikyū descended onto the island and the children they had were the first Okinawans. The first child was a son, and he was a king; the second was a daughter, and she was a Noro priestess, and the third was another son, a farmer.

There used to be a ceremony every twelve years on Kudakajima, called “izaiho”. Every woman between age 31 and 70 had to take part. The youngest ones were initiated by a Noro as shaman priestesses — Yuta. Every woman over 31 on the island was considered a Yuta or Noro. What intrigued me was that if Obāchan had stayed on the island and not gone to Tokyo to marry Ojīchan in her twenties, she would have become one too. Then I read that all those who don’t obey the call end up being punished in some way. Sounds a bit harsh, and a lot like superstition — but then I think of Obāchan’s accident, Mum’s alcoholism, and wonder, if shamanism’s passed down the maternal bloodline, and they didn’t follow what they were called to do, then... Who knows?

I can’t get over what they do here with people when they’re dead.

I thought I heard voices again. The white noise of the roaring waterfall has other sounds hidden in it. Maybe I’ve been listening to it for so long, my mind’s playing tricks on me. A while ago I thought I could even hear a choir singing in beautiful harmonies. It sounded like how you’d imagine a choir of angels. There’s nobody here, so it must be the waterfall. It’s as if it’s calling me.

I just looked at the photos I've been taking here. The huge boulders and dense foliage, and the massive gorge falling away from this spot, taking the water tumbling down with it, all look a bit tame in the viewfinder. The vegetation's so thick you'd need a machete to cut your way through, it's virtually jungle. Only a decade ago there were no paths, and anyone who came up here had to clamber around the sides of the gorge, holding onto rope anchored into its rock walls. It must have been a big deal back then, coming up here.

My hand's cramping up now and my legs have gone to sleep. I haven't written about my time with the Noro yet. I've still got most of the day, but the last bus to Naha leaves Nago at five. I better not miss that. Archie will be waiting for me at the hotel, and then we'll go for dinner. And I have to get back to Nago by 3.30, for my second appointment with the Noro. I need to get this all down before the power of it fades.

I got her number from a guy Archie and I met in Naha. We stopped at a funky little café in the Tsuboya District, one of those Japanese folky-contemporary-cool places with dark wood, hand-thrown pottery mugs, and blue and white traditional textiles. The owner made good coffee. He was a typical hipster barista type, with a beard and ponytail and a flat cap. There weren't many people in the shop, and we got talking.

He wasn't Okinawan — he came to live here from Tokyo. We've met a few Yamato expats who chose to move here. I guess it's like the way Londoners move to France or Spain, to the mountains or the sea, to get back in touch with themselves after feeling lost after years of living in the city.

He was a happy guy, smiling and friendly. He had some corporate job before giving it up to come here and open his café, and play music in his spare time. It was a lifestyle choice, he said, to save his sanity. He had a band, and invited us to a gig the day after tomorrow. It's Okinawan fusion, jazz with a bit traditional Okinawan harmony thrown in. He says his bandmates are all Shima-bito, Okinawans. Can't wait.

I told him my mother was half-Okinawan and he said he could see that immediately when I walked in. I've seen a few people who look a bit like me here; I don't know if they're

half Japanese, but generally, Okinawans look a bit different from Yamato people — higher bridges to their noses, bigger eyes, darker eyebrows and skin. Like me.

I'm relaxed here because I seem to be accepted as I am. In Yamato I'm treated like a Gaijin. Unlike here, people won't talk back to me in Japanese even if I start a conversation with them in Japanese. In London, people don't bat an eyelid at my looks, but for different reasons than here — it's an itinerant city, people from all over the world come and go, and along with everyone else, I'm invisible, just another face in an indistinguishable mass of faces.

Something's changing inside. I used to feel so comfortable with the anonymity of London, but I'm starting to envy the sense of belonging and community that people have here. I feel lonely, even with Archie around. In London I'm floating, unattached to anything. Since I got here I feel as though I've grown roots.

The guy asked how my parents met. I didn't want to talk about it, but I did say Mum was dead and that I'd come here to see if I could find out more about her past. I told him how I'd hoped to meet a Noro who might be able to help me, but hadn't had any luck with the phone number my cousin had given me. So he told me about a woman in Nago on the Motobu Peninsula, in the northern half of the main island of Okinawa. He'd never met her, but a friend of his often visited her. He said she was well known, that I should give her a try.

I called, even though this Noro wouldn't have met Mum and wouldn't be able to help me with information about my father. I was curious though. Her assistant picked up the phone. I made an appointment to meet Tokashiki-sensei and asked how to get to her house. She said it was complicated, that I should ring her when the time came and she'd come to pick me up from my hotel.

Just got up to walk around because my legs had gone to sleep. I stood in the spray at the edge of the big pool at the base of the fall and felt overwhelmed by the roar of water. I took off my shoes and socks and dunked my toes — it was icy. Then I walked right in, even though the stones were slippery. The cold really hurt my feet, but I stood there for ages, staring at the waterfall, and eventually the pain stopped. Maybe my feet went numb, but I think it's because I'd surrendered to the pain, and that made it bearable. I could have stayed there longer but I wanted to finish this, so I got out again, feeling revitalised. Getting these words down makes what's happening feel real, as if it's the only way I can be sure I exist.

It's wilder up here in the north than Naha and the south. On our first trip here, our bus drove along the narrow strip of road between the mountains and the sea and I felt pressed in on either side by something mysterious and unknown.

That day we went to Nakijingusuku and walked around the castle ruins. The walls were enormous, built without mortar from huge boulders cut with ruler-straight edges. We saw a Noro wearing a white robe and a crown of green leaves sitting under a tree. She had her eyes closed and her hands together, moving her lips silently. Now and then she'd raise her palms upwards and nod. She had a tray of awamori liquor, tangerines and rice in front of her. I stood staring at her in a trance, until Archie whispered that we should leave her in peace. I came to, and we crept away.

We hired bikes and cycled over two long bridges to Kourijima. It's a tiny island and we cycled round it in half an hour. We ate bowls of delicious uni-don in a little shack on a hill with a sea view. They say the best sea urchins come from there, lucky we were there in season. We cycled to a tiny white beach and sat gazing out at that extraordinary turquoise sea. We were the only people there. I wished we could have stayed longer but the bikes had to go back to the rental place.

On the way back our bus passed clusters of tombs. They're called "kamebaka" because they're shaped like turtles' backs. I tried to take photos but every single one was

blurred. I thought of what Okinawans do with loved ones' bodies when they die, about Mum, and her bones.

There's a short story by an Okinawan writer, Ōshiro called "Turtleback Tomb". A family hides in its ancestral tomb, like lots of Okinawans did during the 'Typhoon of Steel'. The corpse of a Yamato soldier falls from the roof of their family tomb, almost killing a young grandchild. She's unconscious and the grandmother calls for a Noro to bring her mabui (spirit) back because she thinks the trauma made it leave the child's body. The bombardment from the American battleships, which had gone on months and killed thousands, made it impossible for a Noro to come to the tomb, and after that, all is lost. It made me cry. The Okinawans endured intolerable suffering during the war. It makes me wonder where Obāchan's family was during the Battle of Okinawa and whether they hid in their tomb, too. Where are they now?

I'd rather find them, now, instead of my father. I dread the idea of discovering he doesn't remember Mum, or if he does, that he dismisses it as a one-night stand. Mum wrote how much they loved each other in her diaries. He was going to marry her and take her to Hawaii, along with all the other Okinawans migrating there. It seems awful to hope for my own father's death, but I'd rather find out he was killed in action somewhere, than find out Mum meant nothing to him. I wonder if he read any of the letters Mum sent him? I wonder if he knew I existed?

The war was terrible everywhere, but in Okinawa it was a special kind of hell. People thought the Japanese army would protect them, but it didn't. The soldiers often went into tombs where families were hiding, killing crying babies so they wouldn't be given away, while American soldiers threw in grenades. Nobody could get out to dig their food from the fields because of the constant bombardment, and thousands starved. Three quarters of the population died.

After the Japanese surrender, Okinawan survivors killed themselves and their children, because there'd been propaganda saying American soldiers would rape and torture. They

were given grenades and told death would be a better fate. The G.I.s tried to stop them, but thousands used those grenades or jumped off the Mabuni cliffs. They say there was a sea of blood and bodies. Those that were saved were so shocked to find the Americans looked after them. Although they were interned in camps and not allowed home, they were fed and their wounds tended to. The Americans are still here with their military bases. Poor Okinawans, still crushed between the power of Yamato and America.

I had to stop again for a moment to stretch my legs and went back to the waterfall. Writing about the war made me feel desperately sad. I want to wipe it away. I'm going to write about the Noro now.

I rang the number I'd been given and spoke to Tokashiki-sensei's daughter, Misa. She said her mother looked forward to meeting me. Then she goes, "My mother asks if you enjoyed your visit to Kourijima yesterday?" It was only once I was standing outside waiting to be picked up I realised I hadn't told her we'd gone there.

Even though Misa was as nice as she'd sounded on the phone, I was nervous. We drove past a big banyan tree called "Hinpun Gajumaru". It's meant to be a protective spirit and a symbol of Nago but it looked forlorn in the middle of a roundabout, asphalted in so it couldn't put tendril roots down to grow new trunks.

We drove up lots of twisty narrow streets that led to a hill, where there was a house surrounded by trees. It had a sturdy, round-edged white stone gate and an Okinawan terracotta tile roof with a fierce looking stone shīsā lion on it. Behind the gate there was a cluster of three big, smooth rocks, each a different size and colour, and behind that was a little courtyard full of plants, shells and smaller rocks. In a corner, waterlilies grew in a water-filled stone basin. The water rippled, probably from fish swimming inside. The place made me feel warm and happy and welcome.

Misa invited me inside, so I took off my shoes and stepped up into a big, open room. It was really bright, with sunlight reflecting off the pale wood walls and the tatami floor. It smelled of incense, fresh and earthy at the same time, jasmine and sandalwood, maybe. There was a wooden statue of the goddess Benzaiten with her flowing robes and lute and a cabinet full of conch and spider shells, and an altar with ancestral tablets and incense, just like mine. It had offerings of tangerines, rice cakes and bottles of awamori on it. Seems the spirits of Tokashiki-sensei's ancestors like their alcohol, too.

Misa asked me to sit on a zabuton and I sat Yamato-neat with legs folded under, but she told me to relax and stretch them out. She brought coffee and a slice of cake. It seemed so everyday — if it weren't for the statues and shells it could have been any ordinary home.

I'd thought because Tokashiki-sensei was an important Noro, I'd have to be formal, but the moment she walked in, I felt at ease. She had her hair up in a topknot and wore a turquoise blouse with a long skirt covered in a blue floral pattern. I'd expected white robes and a crown of leaves, but apparently this is only for ceremonies. She looked serious as she walked in, but when she met my eyes she looked right into me and smiled so her whole face lit up. I guess she was in her late 60s, early 70s — the age Mum would be if she were still alive.

She closed her eyes, lowered her head and made clasping gestures with her hands. She muttered under her breath, then looked up at me suddenly and said something like, "Your mother and grandmother are glad you've come back." I said "What?" but she carried on. She asked me my birth year, then asked me what I wanted to know. I said I wanted to know about my mother and father and anything else she thought was important.

She scribbled diagrams on a piece of paper and began to talk, fast. Even though she toned down her Okinawan dialect there were lots of words I'd never heard before. I didn't want to interrupt, writing words I didn't understand in my notebook, hoping to look them up later. She talked about elements expressing themselves in nature — trees an expression of air, the sun an expression of fire, a rock the expression of earth, stuff like that. I tried to follow,

thinking this wasn't news to me, but she peered into my face as if she were trying to communicate a deeper meaning.

She started asking questions. How long had my mother been dead? I wondered how she knew Mum was dead, but she must have guessed. I said seven years. Where did she die? London. Where are her remains? I said I didn't know what to do with her bones I had at home. She went quiet and closed her eyes, nodding and twitching her mouth as if she were listening to somebody. When she opened her eyes she asked me what I knew about my father.

I said I didn't even know who he was. I said I needed to know where he is, whether he knows about me, whether or not he's still alive. She kept her eyes closed, pursing her lips, nodding. I heard her breathing. She rocked back and forth, then said, "This doesn't matter. It is not important". I felt annoyed and wanted to ask her what she meant. At that exact moment she opened her eyes and looked right inside me. I felt as if she'd reached in and stirred something in my chest. My irritation evaporated, and when she said, "It's not for you to know", I accepted that. It seems like a dream, now.

She went on to tell me it was good and necessary I'd returned to Okinawa. I said it was my first time here, but she ignored me, and said "Your mother's ancestors are happy you have returned." She told me I had to be more aware of them, pay my respects more often, that I wasn't thinking enough about my place within the lineage of my ancestors, within nature, within the universe. She told me I had to offer my gratitude to "the elements", the air, the earth, the water. She told me I'd be in danger if I didn't. I wondered if she were a bit bonkers. She kept repeating, "It is important you pay respect to them before you pass through." I asked her, twice, what she meant but she wouldn't answer.

I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what I'd expected. I knew I hadn't expected her to tell my fortune, or predict the future, because I don't believe in that stuff. But she kept looking at me gently and kindly, intent on making me understand what she was

saying. Then she was off again, clasping, rocking and muttering, drawing diagrams. I wondered if I'd made a mistake coming to see her.

As soon as I thought that she stopped short and said, "Is everything all right?" Her eyes twinkled and she looked right into me again. When she looked at me like that, my anxiety and doubt melted away and I wasn't certain of anything any more.

She told me to come back again for "mabui wakashi". I didn't know what that was, though I know "mabui" means spirit. She explained Mum's "mabui" was still stuck to me and was struggling to leave, still bound to me through objects we shared. She said, "You have not helped her go to sūka", and even though I didn't know exactly what she meant, my heart swooped into my belly. I wanted to leap to my defence, to explain Mum's selfishness and cruelty, how messed up she was, why I was still angry with her, why it was hard for me to "pay my respects".

Without warning, she reached across the table and grasped my hands in hers. She stared at the scar on my hand for a long time. I was taken aback, but once she closed her eyes and began nodding and murmuring, I started to relax. My body was buzzing, probably from sitting on the floor too long, but the heat of her hands sent trails of sensation up my arms. It was pleasant and almost sent me to sleep.

She pulled me out of my trance when she said again, forcefully, "To stay out of danger you must pay your respect to the elements; only then will you safely pass through." Her eyes were still closed.

My rational voice popped into my head — she's bonkers, this is nonsense, you're being taken in — but despite these thoughts my chest felt full, as if it were glowing, as if something were about to pop out of it.

When she opened her eyes and smiled at me, it seemed the consultation was over. She asked me when I could return for the "mabui wakashi" and I said had to talk to Archie. She gave me black incense sticks and a sheaf of sand-coloured paper to take home and burn as an

offering. She also gave me a small bottle of sacramental awamori, saying “Your mother will enjoy this.” Oh, the irony.

She asked if I was hungry and I suddenly found I was ravenous. She asked me to follow her into her kitchen. She put a pair of chopsticks and a cup of iced chrysanthemum tea on the table and pulled out a chair. She lit the gas under a huge pot on the stove. We didn’t speak, and for once I didn’t feel compelled to say anything. It was relaxing to sit and watch her cook. I felt like a child again. She stepped out the back door with a colander and returned with it full of mustard greens, herbs and tomatoes. She caught my eye and smiled. In the quiet I felt wrapped in a blanket.

I zoned out. Before long she was popping bowls and dishes on the table; fish stew, stir-fried vegetables, brown rice and azuki beans. She told me to eat, so I tucked in. It was delicious and simple, plenty of garlic in the vegetables. Sitting opposite me, she put her hands together, closed her eyes and whispered something. Then she began to eat, slowly, utterly focussed on her food. We ate in silence. Once I’d eaten my food, she got up and said, “I have to go to Nakijin today to officiate” and told me she’d drop me off at the hotel on the way.

I realised I hadn’t paid her and pulled an envelope from my bag with five thousand yen in it. She seemed nonplussed, shook her head and said, “Next time”. On our way out she took a big spider shell from the cabinet and wrapped it in tissue, and gave it to me with a bag of sea salt. She told me to hang the shell beside my front door and put a little pile of salt at each corner of the house when I got home.

In the car, Tokashiki-sensei asked whether I’d been to Hiji-ōtaki — where I am now. She said it was a special place and that I should come here the day I returned for the “mabui wakashi”. We’d stopped at a traffic light and she turned to me with an intense look and said I had to make sure I honoured the utaki along the path to the waterfall. I asked her what they were, and she said I’d know instinctively where these sacred places were. “Walk with

gratitude and respect, and without fear”, she said. And she told me to wear warm clothes as it would be surprisingly cold.

After that she didn't say much more until we arrived at the hotel. I said I'd call to arrange the next meeting, and she took my hands in hers. Again, the warm buzz. She said, “Take great care. Remember what I said.” I got out, and she drove off.

I tried explaining what happened to Archie over a beer that evening, but I couldn't convey the feeling of it and it sounded pretty ordinary, even a bit suspect. We were sitting in a bar in Nago and the owner was behind the counter. He heard me mention the Noro's name. He said she was powerful, seen as a goddess of Kourijima, and that I was lucky to have a meeting with her, because she doesn't meet with everybody. I felt he wanted me to tell him about our encounter, but it didn't feel right, so we ordered more beers, and Archie and I talked between ourselves.

When we asked for the bill, the owner asked us what we'd seen of the Motobu and whether we liked it. I said I was planning to visit Hiji-ōtaki. He said it was a “beautiful and strong” place. I asked him what he meant by “strong”. He said the waterfall was special, powerful; that the water that came from Mount Yonaha was icy cold and pure, and though it was a beautiful place, not many locals went there because they were afraid. When I asked why, he said people had died climbing up there, or swimming in the water. Even with new walkways to make it safer, he still didn't want to go.

He told us that when he was a young man he'd gone up there with a friend. It was before the walkways had been built, and they'd climbed up using the ropes attached to the rocks. His friend climbed a boulder to dive into the water at the base of the fall. It was deep enough, and didn't seem dangerous. But on contact with the water, his friend died, just like that. The post-mortem showed he'd had a heart attack. Apparently the cold of the water had been too much of a shock. Nobody could understand it, he said. He was young, fit and healthy.

Archie and I didn't talk much on the bus back to Naha, and I slept a bit. I had strange, vivid dreams that I forgot as soon as I woke up.

Even though Archie thought the meeting with the Noro was nonsense, it left a deep impression on me. Firstly, I had an overwhelming urge to go to Hiji-ōtaki. Secondly, I didn't really care any more about finding my father. The thought of going to the military base was draining. I wanted to hold onto the feeling of the land and the sea, of Okinawa as it might have been before the Americans, before Yamato. I told Archie that the Noro wanted to see me again, and he said, what for, more money? After that, I decided not to talk about it any more. I just told him that I'd come up here on my own today, to come to the waterfall and see the Noro afterwards.

So here I am.

I wrote down questions for Tokashiki-sensei this time, about Mum, my grandmother, my ancestors on Kudakajima. I want to ask her what it's like to be a Noro, and learn more about the elements, the gods and goddesses, the rituals.

On my way up here, I paid my respects at each utaki I passed, just as the Noro asked. Some were obvious, constructed out of stone, scattered with piles of incense ash, others were hollows under trees and in rocks. I stood at each, eyes closed, imagining my place in the universe, feeling the ground beneath my feet, space and air above me, feeling the sun, the trees, the wind, the sound of the flowing river.

At first the walk along the river was gentle, but the track grew steeper. The walkways skirted sheer rock faces dripping with water, with ferns sprouting from cracks. I saw a lizard with a bright blue tail. Everywhere there were trees so enormous I couldn't see their tops, even when I tilt my head right back.

I crossed a suspension bridge. I wasn't prepared for how high up it was and my knees felt wobbly. The river looked tiny, flowing at the bottom of the gorge far below. Boulders and trees and plants spilled out everywhere. I imagined what it would feel like to fall through air down onto the rocks, wondered how long it would take. On the other side of the bridge

the temperature suddenly changed. It was so cold I had to put on my jacket. Apart from the sound of the river and the moaning of the wind, there was nothing, not even the sound of birds. It's odd there aren't any birds this side of the gorge.

I felt afraid as I climbed higher. There's something forceful and overwhelming about this place. I felt I was being watched and freaked out, until I remembered the Noro telling me to feel gratitude, not fear. So I took a deep breath and walked with all my attention, feeling the ground firm beneath my feet, the air on my skin, imagining the trees, rocks and ferns as living expressions of the elements. That's when I started feeling the place in my body. It doesn't make sense, but that's how it felt.

I stopped now and then to take photos, to remind myself of how it feels to walk here. I came to a giant crevice in the rock face. It was striking, impressive: an upside-down V so deep and dark I couldn't see inside it. I wanted to take a picture, but something stopped me. I just couldn't take the photo. And suddenly, I was overcome by fear, and I ran away in a panic, up and up, until I came to a tall tree with huge, gnarly, moss-covered roots. They made a sort of nest, so I sat amongst them and caught my breath. I kept repeating to myself, respect and gratitude, respect and gratitude, and closed my eyes, waiting for my heart to stop hammering. Then I calmed down. I could see the crevice in the rock below, and I nodded to it, and felt a little crazy. It was just a crevice in a rock. Then I carried on walking up.

Long before I saw them, I heard the falls, like distant thunder. Far below to my left, I could see smaller waterfalls dropping into clear pools which looked incredibly inviting. That's when I was surprised to feel I wanted to get into the water.

I remember the moment I walked up the final set of steps and saw the waterfall for the first time. The sight of it made me gasp. It felt familiar, because I'd seen photos, but I wasn't prepared for the force of it. The pictures diminish its power. It's enormous. I don't know why it feels so important to stay here as long as I can beside it.

I'm so lucky to have had the place to myself. I feel so alive.

I can't believe I want to get into this water. Me. In the water. Why am I not afraid? Especially after hearing about the bar owner's friend. If I knew how, I'd even swim. I've been looking at ways to cross over to the other side.

If I climb over the big boulder at the base of the waterfall, there's only a small stretch of water to cross. The flow there's fierce, but I'll use the rocks as stepping-stones, and there are plenty of handholds. The current's too strong to wade through — I'd be swept down to the gorge and certain death. On the other side, there's a thick crack up the rock that leads to a ledge. If I could perch there I'd almost be under the waterfall. Directly underneath would be too dangerous — the power of the water would sweep me off. But that little ledge is in exactly the right place to get me as close as possible to the waterfall and stay safe. I want to feel the spray. I'm imagining the water on my head. I need it. I've seen Buddhist monks standing under waterfalls, praying. I thought it must be incredibly cleansing, but until this moment the idea has always been terrifying.

I'm not afraid now. Wow! Archie'll never believe it. I'll take off my clothes to keep them dry. My undies could pass as a sporty bikini, so it won't be embarrassing if someone comes. I won't be up there for long. It'll be freezing cold and I need the sun to dry me off. And I don't want to miss that bus.

Archie

He closed the notebook, put his face in his hands and wept. Such huge relief, despite everything. She had not done it deliberately. At the same time, his chest ached with sadness.

Hearing steps echo along the linoleum corridor, Archie wiped his face with his sleeve and kept his head down, busying himself by putting the notebook back in Erika's bag. Someone strode past. Once the sound of footsteps faded, he keened again, like a little boy. He'd held it in until then, focussed only on finding out what had happened to Erika.

He had gone to meet her at Naha bus terminus the previous evening. He had felt the lack of her all day, getting lost amongst the narrow, jumbled lanes of the covered market at Makishi, wanting to share everything he was seeing with her. It wasn't just that he needed her to translate and explain things. When he was with her, he felt himself lithe, flowing and open. Only she could unlock this thing in him, drawing out a sense of ease. One day apart was all he could bear. Ever since the incident with the knife he had pulled her closer in, wanting to protect her. He wanted to wring out every last moment of their time in Okinawa. Only ten more days and it would be over; they'd be back in London, leading their separate lives.

He arrived early at the terminus and sat watching people coming and going, thinking of things he wanted to tell Erika about his day. He had found a bar-restaurant that afternoon, *izakaya*-style, and thought it was the sort of place she liked. He ducked in to reserve a table, miming that he wanted a reservation for two, pointing at his watch and scribbling 8:00 PM on a piece of paper.

No doubt she'd have more to report on her meeting with the *Noro*. Something about her manner after that first meeting had bothered him; she had a bright, wild look in her eyes, as if she were being pulled towards something dangerous, unstable, beyond his control. He

could see she'd been excited by it, and worried it would encourage her further into the strange mindset that had prompted her to cut her hand.

He decided to discuss her seeing someone professional when the time was right — not now, maybe on the flight home — someone she could talk to about her relationship with her mother, her lack of a father, about that moment she discovered her mother's body, how she felt responsible for her mother's death, about cutting her own hand open with a knife.

He watched the One-eleven bus pull in — easy number to remember — and stood impatiently beside it, craning his neck to try spotting her through the windows. The bus disgorged half a dozen people. No Erika. He flung himself forward just as the driver closed the doors and prepared to drive off, grabbing the side mirror and rapping on the doors. He would have clung onto it as it took off onto the main road if it hadn't stopped, making him stumble. The doors opened again.

The bus driver was taken aback, and annoyed. *Hai? Nandesuka?*

Uh, nihongo dekimasen. The same sentence he used whenever he needed people to know he didn't understand. The driver sighed.

Archie scabbled in his pocket for his wallet, opening it to show the driver the photo inside. He peered theatrically inside the bus, pointed to the photo, then looked at the driver again, trying to make a question mark in his face. The driver stared at the photo. *Kono bus ni desuka?*

Archie didn't have a clue what he was saying, but nodded anyway. Archie knew it was useless, and as if to confirm this, the driver made an upside-down U with his mouth and shook his head. *Yaa, kono kata wa onori ni narimasendeshitane.*

Archie understood. Erika had missed the last bus back from Nago. He stepped out of the bus, bewildered. It was already dark. He had to re-order his thoughts, work out what to do next. Let's not panic, he told himself. There could be all kinds of reasons why she missed the bus. She's probably just finding another way to get back to Naha tonight. Maybe he should wait for her at the hotel. He regretted their decision not to bother with mobile phones.

She's fine. He kept telling himself this despite a dark heaviness spreading in him, a stomach-rolling anxiety that was easier to sit with once it morphed into anger. She's supposed to be organised. How could she be so careless as to miss the bus? It was probably the bloody *Noro's* fault! Those irresponsible hippies, always drifting about. Erika, mesmerised like last time, wouldn't have noticed the time. She should wear a watch. He'd get her one for her birthday. Where was she, for fuck's sake?

The hotel. She'd ring the hotel as soon as she realised she'd missed the bus. He had to get back, there'd be a message for sure. He leapt up, started running. He stopped at the junction outside the bus terminal, caught his breath while he waited for the green. It was a long way to the hotel; he couldn't run all the way. Better stay calm; walk swift and calm. It was going to be fine.

Kokusaidōri was heaving with crowds of high school students, laughing, shouting, spending. Every shop sold the same crappy kitsch: key rings, dolls, t-shirts, mugs, hats, bags, themed with cartoonish Okinawan symbols of Ryūkyūan culture: *kijimuna* sprites, purple *beniimo* characters, *shīsā* lions, nobbly *gōya* bitter gourds, chrysanthemum tea, *bingata* textile reproductions, bottles of *awamori*. Attractive young men and women stood outside like circus barkers, vying with one another for customers. *Sanshin* music blared from shop stereos, clashing beats resounding through the street. There were games arcades, hamburger joints, shops advertising *taco rice*, *Okinawa udon* and other local specialties. As Archie swept past dodging giggling schoolgirls, the colourful mish-mash of Kokusaidōri he'd not minded so much before felt jarring and tawdry. He resisted the urge to push people out of the way.

Striding to the hotel reception, panting, the smiling, uniformed woman bowed and said, *Konbanwa, otsukaresama desu...*

He interrupted. *Is there a message for me? Room 207. And my key, please.*

No message, sir. Have a good night.

Are you sure? No message? Did you check the desk there? He pointed, knowing such inefficiency would be unusual.

I'm sorry sir, no message. If there is a message, I will make a call to your room.

Thanks. He tried to smile.

In the room, he slumped into the armchair and gazed out the window into the night. She's out there somewhere. Where the hell is she?

Maybe she went to the internet café in Nago and sent an email.

He got the lift back down to the lobby, where the two computer monitors were occupied by businessmen. He twitched with impatience, rummaged in his pocket for change, bought himself a drink from the vending machine, paced up and down, garnering curious looks from hotel guests waiting in the lobby. At last. One of the businessmen logged out. Archie nearly bumped into him in his haste. His inbox was full of the usual junk. A message from his mother. Otherwise, nothing. He finished his drink, threw the empty can with a clatter into the recycling bin, and went back upstairs.

If only he had the phone number for the *Noro*. He went to Erika's bedside table and searched the drawer. Restaurant flyers; tourist leaflets, lip salve, hand cream, her hairbrush. No pieces of paper with phone numbers. Then he remembered the café in the Tsuboya district. He would go there, see if he could find that guy. No way could he simply sit in the hotel room and wait. He had to do something.

He cut through the Makishi market. The Heiwa-dōri souvenir stalls — the ones closest to Kokusaidōri — were still open, garish and blaring. But as he walked through the covered lanes, the chaos began to fade, the stalls reverting to what always had been: rice sellers, kimono makers, fishmongers, all closed by dusk, following natural cycles of day and night. Here and there, a small bar, a paper lantern glowing red, like a warning. He hastened through the darkening night towards the crooked, cobbled old streets of the Tsuboya district, where the potters' studios and shops, too, were closed. He felt a growing despair. With no

customers walking the streets to ply with coffee, the café was bound to be closed. Not knowing where else to go, he walked on.

Sure enough, the café was dark, save for a small light glowing somewhere in its depths, a closed sign on the door. Archie peered through the windows, fighting rising panic. If only it didn't get so dark so early. Maybe he should find a way of getting back up to Nago? No buses. How much would a taxi cost? A lot. A three hour round trip. He would go to a taxi rank anyway – what else could he do – and ask one of the drivers. He started to walk away when he heard the door slide open with a rattle.

Hi! The coffee shop owner stepped out. Archie fought the urge to hug him.

Hi! Do you remember me?

Yes! You came with nice half Okinawan girl. How are you? I am practising my music.

Good! Good. Look, Erika went to see that Noro in Nago today, the one you told her about. She was supposed to come back to Naha tonight, but she wasn't on the bus.

Bit more slowly, please. Yes. The Noro in Nago.

Could I have her telephone number?

Okay, sure. Come. You can wait inside. He disappeared into the back of the shop.

Oh god, please let her be at the Noro's house. The man reappeared with his phone, the light from its screen lighting his face in the dark. He took a pen and piece of paper from behind the counter and scribbled numbers. *Here it is. I hope everything is okay.*

Thanks. Could I use your phone? Archie gestured at the telephone behind the counter.

Of course. Please. The man took the receiver off its hook, passed it over.

Archie punched in the number and listened to it ringing. It stopped. *Hello?* He found himself talking over a recording. Answering service. A bleep. Start again. *Hello, my name is Archie, I...* It was unlikely the Noro would understand his message. Anyway, there was no number he could give her to call back. He put the phone down.

No answer? said the man, rubbing his beard.

No. Archie sat on a stool at the counter, head in his hands. *I don't know what to do.*

Your girl is missing?

Erika is missing. Gone. Not here. Archie shrugged, puffing out his cheeks. His shoulders sagged.

Hmm. The man picked up a small glass on the counter and took a swig. He held it up to Archie. *Do you want whisky?*

Oh god, yes please.

The man poured amber liquid from a dimpled bottle into a fresh glass and passed it to Archie. The man watched as he downed it in one.

Wow, the man said, impressed. *You are strong with whisky.*

I'm very worried.

Hmm. He poured Archie another, then stood swirling his own in his glass. *Okay. You want I call the Noro? I can leave message in Japanese for you. Maybe she can call here.*

Oh my god, you are one hell of a guy. Yes. Yes please. Thank you. The man dialled and waited. Archie heard the ringing, then the beep. The man began to speak.

E~moshi moshi...Emoto to moushimasuga, anō... There was a click, and he straightened up. He dipped his head. *Hai, hai, moshi moshi, Tokashiki-sensei de irasshaimasuka? Hai, anō, osoku ojamashite shitsureishimasu ga...*

Archie sat up. There was a female voice on the other end of the line. The man was talking, looking at him, his head bobbing. Archie forced himself to breathe slow, calm. Alert, like an animal sniffing the air, he watched for signs, listening to the rise and fall of the man's voice, for clues in the muffled tones of the voice on the other end of the line, in the changing expressions in the man's face.

Hai, Erika-san no koto nandesuga...danna-sama ga...hai

Archie leaned in, listening, though he understood nothing.

E? Sōnandesuka? A~, taihen na kotoni...sōdesuka...

Archie stopped breathing. The man was frowning, nodding, his voice concerned. Oh god, something bad's happened. His head whirled. No more whisky. He waited, breathless, for the man to finish the exchange on the telephone.

The man's eyes were fixed on Archie as he put the phone down.

This was Tokashiki sensei, the Noro.

Yes. Come on, get on with it.

Ah... The man seemed to be struggling to find words.

Erika. She knows where she is? Archie fought his surging panic.

Yes. Erika-san. She is in Okinawa Motobu hospital. The Noro just came back from there. She says Erika will be okay. I can drive you to Nago now, to the hospital. I don't mind. My name is Ryouji. My car is outside. This way.

“Shizumu Se Areba Ukabu Se Ari”

If the current sinks, so it will rise again

*

She flicked through the photos on her phone. Its memory was nearly full. She should delete some to make room for the new, she thought, her mind dragging, lazy. As she looked through them, the thought oozed into her consciousness: these are images from another time and a different reality.

She wondered where Archie was, whether she'd dreamed his visit last night. The nurses had reduced her morphine and her head was throbbing, her skull feeling as though it was expanding, shrinking, expanding, shrinking. Maybe she should ask the nurses to increase the dose again. She could ask them if she'd really had visitors. Maybe she'd been so out of it she'd imagined him standing there, crying, with the bearded guy from that café in Naha. Why would that guy be here? She remembered the weight of her bag as Archie put it on the bed. The bag was on the chair beside her, so she hadn't imagined that. They must have found it when they found her. About that, she had no recollection. And if Archie had been there last night, she didn't remember anything he'd said. There was something else. Another visitor? A woman. She remembered the warm touch of her hands, and a low voice, urgent. Maybe a doctor, or a nurse. She was no longer sure what was real and what was a dream.

She squinted at the selfie she'd taken on the boulder beside the waterfall. Her eyes were screwed tight against the sunlight as she smiled, self-conscious. She recalled the breeze tousling her hair as she took the picture. That recollection was still sharp. She recognised her face as belonging to her body. And yet, looking at the expression laid over it, the furrows between the brows, the small wells of shadow in the eye sockets, the solidified jaw, she felt as if she were looking at someone else, a stranger she might have passed in the street once and

registered only unconsciously, only to pass them again a week later and wonder, now, where I have seen this person?

She stared at the photo a long time, peering into her own eyes. She wasn't sure what she was looking for. The face continued to smile out at her. Although it was only taken yesterday, she barely recognised herself. Pixels arranged into shapes and colours would never convey the enormity of what happened to her. She embodied it. She *was* the evidence. She pressed a button. *DELETE?* She selected *YES*.

A nurse told her how she had been brought in. A family, hiking, had found her at the falls, and someone had run back to the emergency call point on the walking trail to ring for help. Nobody knew how long she had been there. Paramedics — specialists in mountain rescue — had carried her all the way back down strapped into a cradle, covered in a silver blanket, her neck and back immobilised. She was unconscious when she arrived at the hospital, she said. The mother of the family, which was from Nago, had come in the ambulance with her, holding her hand. A lot of people got into trouble up in the Yambaru, the nurses said, looking at her in a strange way.

So sleepy. The heavy lull of morphine. The phone slid out of her hand. She was no longer sure what was dream, what was real. Time lost meaning. She drifted.

She was there, in front of the waterfall. It was immense now she was close. Its spray dampened her face, and as the falling force of water pushed air outwards it caressed her hair, chilled the wetness on her cheeks. It seemed strange that such power should produce this delicate spray, so fine it tickled her face. The mist on her skin formed droplets, which formed rivulets, which trickled down her forehead, her cheeks. Water weighed down her lashes and blinded her.

She blinked so she could see and she looked down at her bare toes, numb with cold, curled tightly onto each stepping-stone, torrents of water blasting between them, juddering

down into the cavernous drop to her left. She felt the spray from the waterfall to her right, felt it cleansing her. She was not afraid. She just had to clear her vision. It was important that she see.

There were smooth pebbles beneath the shallows fringing the dark soul of the pool to her right. They were luminous, alluring. Crouching down, she dipped her arm into the icy water and captured one in the palm of her hand. It was perfectly round, its pale opalescence reflecting the light so its colour changed as she turned it this way and that. She had to have it. At first she considered tucking it into her bra or knickers, then thought better of it, climbing back to her rucksack and depositing it inside an inner pocket.

She held tight to the boulder behind her with one hand and stepped back onto the stepping-stones, shifting her weight and swinging her body across, clutching one rock after another until she reached the other side of the shimmering pool. She caught her breath, looking up at the rock face she would climb. Leaning against its wet surface, she ran her fingers along the crack that started there and grew wider, rising higher, leading to the ledge she craved to sit upon and feel the waterfall's spray embrace her. The waterfall called to her.

Barefoot, wearing only her bra and pants, she felt primal, as if she were some agile creature. She caught herself feeling this intensity, and smiled at her seriousness, and for a moment, felt faintly ridiculous. She must climb. Get on with it.

She grasped the crack in the rock with her fingers, finding footholds for her toes. She levered herself up. It was easier than she'd expected. From this position she could see the whole of the waterfall, the shimmering pool below it, the torrent of water cascading down out of the pool into the gorge below, and she felt herself powerful. She turned back to embrace the cliff face, heaving herself up, wedging her toes into the rock's crevices, grasping at the ferns and moss that drooped from its surface. She was much higher now and the waterfall even closer.

She inched her way across, feeling billows of spray encouraging her, enveloping her in clouds. She was in control. The ledge was close. Just a few more metres and she would

reach it. She would have a magnificent view. Maybe she could drop from there into the pool below, if she were careful. She could see the part she should drop into, because it was the darkest, where she could see no rocks. The encircling arms of the pool's edge would stop her from tumbling into the gorge beneath. The waterfall's white noise soothed like the shushing of a mother rocking a crying baby. *Shhh, it's alright, I'm here, shhh...*

Erika shifted her hands forward to the next segment of crack in the rock, put her right foot forward. Just one more manoeuvre and she would be on the ledge. Moved her left foot free, could not find a foothold. She felt the toes of her right foot slide. She was calm. She tried to adjust her position, to find another purchase on the rock, but she felt only soft moss, wet and slippery. Her toes skittered off its surface, leaving her hanging, if only for a second, by the tips of her fingers.

The lightness of air she fell into was delicious. The rush in her ears, the white noise of the falls, her stomach and heart lifted upwards into her throat, soaring within, weightless.

She was drifting, deep and dark. She felt no fear, only a mild unease. She floated through grey emptiness, its edges touched by black void. Water was pressing in on her, heavy, like swaddling. She felt no pain. She was tired. It was tempting to stay where she was. But she was not ready. Her chest tightened for air. Where was the air? Panic flooded in a cold rush, her heart hammering. She kicked towards the rippling mercury mirror overhead with all her strength, forging through the mass of water pulling at her. Terror wiped away lethargy and tiredness; her body kicked upwards, upwards; she rose towards the surface, her ears cracking, lungs twin meteors burning up on re-entry. She burst through to the other side of the mirror and began heaving at the shock of fresh air, spluttering, gulping oxygen and salt water in turn as waves slopped into her gasping mouth, batting her face as she fought and floundered. Her lungs were aflame. As she kicked and vomited, tears merging back into the sea, a figure

plummeted from the dark shadow of the boat, the sound of the loud *blooshh* resonating across the surface of the wave and hurting her ears, which were tight as drumskins with water. Her body could not sustain the fight. Tiredness took over once more, and all went dark.

She drifted through light and dark, sensations flitting like clouds across her skin. She sensed movement, touch, pain. Her arms pulled by cold, tight fingers. The bruising blow of a hard edge. A scraping on her legs of dry wood. Burning lungs. Urgent voices. *Where are her water wings?* Drifting back into the dark. The feel of a mouth on hers, her nose in a cold-fingered pinch, an odd sensation in her chest, of lifting, falling. Vomiting water, coughing and choking. Shaking hands, pulling her this way and that, her body a rag doll. Bile now emerging, burning her throat. Then again, darkness.

She re-emerged into pale light. Softness beneath her head, the bliss of dry sheets. Heavy chest, aching body. A patch of cold wetness against her cheek. Water from her chest or her eyes? She let herself be rocked, distant sounds of water slapping on wood as she listened to voices pierce through thin walls. Words rose and fell; some murmured, others hammering like bullets. Sharp words like those were a signal to hide away, stay small and quiet. She took tiny breaths so air wouldn't catch at the rawness of her throat and make her cough. The coughing and throwing up made her too tired. She shivered. Her head burned hot.

A man's voice – Julian's: *Mistake...fuck's sake!* It strained against a quiet, steely voice — Marit's.

...drinking...could have killed her! Marit sounded angry. Marit's anger made Erika feel good, though it gave her an aching feeling inside, like she might cry.

A third voice, a familiar — her mother. She heard her drawl, loud, sudden: *Oh, Marit, never mind. Erika is okay.*

Julian's voice was louder now, very clear, so whole sentences passed through the walls. *It was an accident! What the fuck are you accusing me of?* There was a bang, a crump of things being knocked over and smashing. A slam made the thin wall vibrate; a

crash against her door as someone passed. Footsteps clumped towards the deck. A pause. Julian cheerily greeting the others up above, as if nothing had happened.

She heard voices next door again. Marit's: *...needs a doctor,*
Michiko...don't...hospital...

Her mother's voice was too low for Erika to make out the words.

Marit again, clearer: *Please, Michiko, you must...she needs...* A clink of glass. *No. Enough...too drunk...stop...*

Now she could hear her mother. The familiar, irritated voice: *...fine...need it. I'm tired...sick of her.* The last words shouted.

Erika braced, recognising it as the voice when screaming and crying were coming, sometimes smashing too, if it was bad. But she heard a moan, and a thump vibrate low against the wall next to her bunk. She reached out and stroked the wooden panels, imagining her mother's body on the other side. Shuffling close, she laid her cheek there. She ached.

Silence. She drifted downwards, slept again.

She woke as her door opened. Her eyes were too heavy to open, but she sensed someone approaching. A cool hand palmed her forehead, resting there a while, drawing heat from it. Erika shivered. The hand moved back onto her hair, stroking and soothing. She kept her eyes closed, fantasising it was her mother, even though it was impossible. The quaking of her body quietened, as if the hand had restored some balance.

Whispered, caring words. The fingers continued to smooth Erika's hair, and she rolled onto her back and cracked open her eyelids. A face close to her own; instead of the dark eyes she craved, she saw Marit's silvery blue ones. Their colour relaxed her, though she saw sadness inside them. She was good at recognising sadness. Erika's eyes filled. She wasn't sure her voice would work so she just nodded and closed her eyes again.

Can I get you anything, dear? Marit asked.

Water. Her voice came as a croak. Strange to want water when she was so waterlogged, but she was burning, thirsty. She heard water pouring. Felt Marit's hand under

her head, lifting, and a cup held to her mouth. She sipped, water trickling from the edges of her lips, tears trickling down her temples into her hair. She kept her eyes closed, kept them in the dark.

“Kore o Shiru o Kore o Shiru to Nashi, Shirazaru o Shirazu to Nase. Kore Shiru
Nari”

*To know that one knows what one knows, and to know that one doesn't know what one
doesn't know: there lies true wisdom*

*

The nurse bustled in with a trolley to take her obs. *Ohayōgozaimasu, Takigawa-san*, she said, unfurling the blood pressure band, the sound of Velcro ripping. *You've been asleep a long time. How are you feeling?*

Erika was disoriented. That other world had seemed so real she couldn't understand where she was, why she hadn't woken up in the bunk, rocking in the belly of the boat. The band tightened around her arm, forcing blood into her fingers, and machinery blipped as the nurse wrote on a clipboard. Erika stared at the pale lilac curtains around her bed, uncomprehending, until the reality — perhaps — of her present came flooding back. It hadn't helped that the nurse had called her by her mother's maiden name. How did she know that?

She struggled to draw her attention back to her body, giving it a quick scan. *A little better*, she said. *But my head hurts. And my throat's dry. I'm thirsty.*

The nurse nodded. *I'll bring water and ice cubes.* She leaned over and checked the drip. *You're on the lowest dose of morphine now. The doctor says there's no need for surgery. You're very lucky, considering how badly you hit your head. Someone will come in a while to help you to the shower. The breakfast trolley is coming around soon. The doctor has said you can eat now, some okayu has been ordered for you. She'll explain more to you on her ward round.*

Okayu. Despite morphine queasiness, Erika felt sudden hunger. She raised herself up against the pillows. She was looking forward to breakfast.

Jesus, you really scared me, Erika. Archie plucked seedless grapes from the bowl on her bed-tray. He had been sitting outside in the corridor until visiting hours began and had just come in with a shopping bag full of things for her to eat. *That was one crazy-ass thing to do.*

She stroked his hand. *I'm sorry. I don't know what took over me when I climbed up those rocks. It was stupid. It was so calm and beautiful up there. I actually felt like swimming. Isn't that amazing?*

They sat in silence, listening to the broad Okinawan dialect of the sun-wizened man who had come to visit his elderly wife in the bed next door. Archie continued popping grapes in his mouth.

Erika, he said, munching. I have something to confess.

She helped herself to grapes.

I read your notebook.

Right.

You aren't angry with me for snooping?

It doesn't matter. She closed her eyes. She felt tired. She racked her memory. What had she written?

I'm sorry I read it without your permission. I had to. She felt too exhausted to reply, so he continued. *I won't lie — when you went missing I fell apart. If it hadn't been for Ryōji, I don't know what I would have done.*

Who's Ryōji?

The guy who owns that café in the Tsuboya district. The one who gave me the number for the Noro.

The Noro. She had missed her appointment with the Noro.

He's been a total geezer. He even drove me up here to see you. I was a blubbering wreck, and he kept telling me to chill, that it would be okay. When you didn't get off that bus

I didn't know what to do. I went to the café and found him. He phoned the Noro for me, and the Noro told him what had happened to you.

The Noro knew what had happened to her?

We drove here straight away. They made us wait for ages and I had no idea how bad you were, so I kept thinking the worst. His voice cracked. All they told me was, you'd been found at the bottom of the waterfall with your head cracked open, and I just thought Christ, she tried to kill herself. He was crying now.

She raised her hand, the drip tugging at the line in the back of her hand, and rubbed his head where the hair whorled. *Shh...Archie...it's okay...I didn't.*

He wiped his face. *I know. That's why I'm glad I read your notebook. It was obvious from what you wrote that it was just an accident. I mean — it's fucking awful as it is, but to think you might have done it deliberately would have finished me.*

He blew his nose, noisily, and cleared his throat. *I read the things you wrote about me.*

She racked her brains. She wouldn't have written anything bad. *What things?*

You know I love you more than anything.

She nodded.

I would do anything. Anything, to make sure you're happy.

She felt her eyes grow hot with tears, blurring his face. She swallowed.

I understood when I read your notebook that you need to be free of me.

No, Archie....

I haven't finished. He squeezed her hand. *I don't mean it in a bad way. I'm not dumping you or anything.* He laughed. *I just — I didn't understand everything that was going on with you, before. You're not exactly an open book.*

Erika gave a wry smile. *I didn't understand it myself, you know.*

You meeting the Noro. I didn't realise what it meant to you, with everything that happened with your family and everything you've gone through. What your mother went through. And about your father.

I still don't know what any of it means.

Did you know the Noro came here to see you? A few times. I met her. She came once while I was here.

You met her...

Of course we couldn't understand each other, not with words. But I see what you meant about her. One of the nurses speaks English, and she told me the Noro came as soon as you'd been brought in from Hiji falls. They let her in because they know her, she does ceremonies here and stuff. She came to do some kind of ritual here with you, though the nurse couldn't tell me what it was. I hadn't met her at that point, and I was really pissed off when I heard that. I thought, who the hell is she, interfering? I'd kind of blamed her for what happened to you.

It wasn't her fault. I missed my appointment with her.

I know that now. But then, I was really angry. So when she came in to see you yesterday, I really gave her the eye. I couldn't say anything to her, but I thought, I'll show her just how pissed off I am. I wanted her to leave. And do you know what she did?

What?

She came right over to this side of the bed, where I'm sitting now, and took my head between her hands and gripped tight.

Erika blurted a laugh. It hurt her head.

You'd think that would have pissed me off even more, but it didn't. It was weird. She crouched down and looked right into my eyes, and something happened.

Like what?

Not sure. It's a bit how you described in your notebook, it's difficult to explain. All I know is my rage melted, boom, just like that. Then I wanted to cry. So I did.

What did the Noro do?

She took her hands off my head and held my hands instead. They were really hot. When she did that I stopped crying. She looked at me, really close, right in my eyes. She wasn't smiling, but it was like her eyes were. And she just said, 'OK', like that, in English. And it was.

Wow.

She sat facing me on the other side of the bed, and we both sat in silence while you slept. You were away with the fairies. She kept nodding at you, and moving her mouth, although I couldn't hear her say anything.

Erika took that in. What else did she do?

Nothing until she left. Before she left, she stood over you, raised both palms to the ceiling and closed her eyes. She was saying things under her breath. She hasn't been back since. She left this for you. He picked up a small envelope beside the bed.

*She opened it; inside were two tiny bags closed with coloured string, one yellow, one purple. They were filled with something gritty. She saw there was a note inside. The Noro had written in *hiragana*, so she'd find it easy to read. *Inside is salt from the Kourijima sea, she'd written, the yellow one is for you, the purple for your husband.* Erika passed the purple one to Archie. *She says this one's for you. It's got salt in it, from Kourijima. A talisman.**

They sat listening to the old man next door talking over the sound of the TV.

Erika.

Yes?

You should go and do your own thing. Without me.

What?

You wrote that you weren't sure whether you really wanted to be with me.

Archie, look, what I wrote...

Look at me, I'm not upset. Really. I'm serious. It's important. Listen.

She waited.

I want us to be together because you're sure you want to be with me. And before that happens, you need to go and do whatever it takes to sort your head out. I don't mean that in a bad way. You've been through a lot, and it's obvious from what you wrote that there's a lot more you need to do before you settle down with me. Or anyone. She drew breath to speak but he stopped her. Wait. I'm not finished. I love you and I know I want to be with you. But only if you're sure about me. Do what you need to do. At first I thought you ought to see a psychiatrist. But now I think you need to be in Okinawa for a while. Spend time with the Noro. Travel the islands. Whatever you want. André's told you there's a job waiting for you whenever you want it. But now's the time to figure things out. Find out about your Dad, talk to Kei about your mum's diaries. We can go back to London together, or you can stay here and I'll head back alone. I can take care of things in your flat while you're gone, if you like. I'd be happy to take over the lease until you get back. I promise I'll move out if you get back and you don't want to be with me. But just give me that, will you? So I can feel I'm close to you?

She blinked. It was too much to take in.

I'm right, aren't I? About you needing to be free?

She nodded. Fat tears dripped from her cheeks onto the bed sheets, turning pale blue navy. Her head still hurt.

Don't. Be happy. It's a great big new exciting start to a great big new exciting adventure.

She was discharged in time to make the flight back home with Archie. She was given a sheaf of X-rays and told to check in at St. Mary's when she got back to London. The travel insurance covered the cost of a taxi to Naha airport and an upgrade to business class. Erika called Kei from the departure lounge, determined not to tell her what happened. Her cousin probed for details, asking her whether they'd been to the military base, whether she had any

news about her father. She was puzzled they had done so little in the time they had in Okinawa, in the end, Erika had to tell her, giving her a toned-down description of her ‘little fall’, but confessed she’d spent her last ten days in hospital. Kei immediately said she’d meet them at Narita, before they boarded their connecting flight. Nothing Erika could say would dissuade her. *I need to see for myself that you’re all right.*

She was there, brow furrowed with worry. As Archie wheeled Erika into the domestic terminal in the chair, her head and neck bandaged above the neck brace, her hand flew to her mouth and she let out a yelp.

It’s not as bad as it looks, said Erika.

But your eyes are all black and bruised! Oh...

Really, Kei-chan, don’t worry. She wanted to get away from the main terminal; people had stopped to gawk. I was lucky. It’s a simple skull fracture and it’s going to mend. I just have to be careful, that’s all.

Skull fracture!

I know it sounds scary. It’s tiny and already knitting together. I must have a head like a tank. I get headaches, but there’s no lasting damage. Though you wouldn’t necessarily be able to tell, she joked, rolling her eyes up in their sockets and lolling her head as much as the neck brace would allow.

They settled in to the Japanese restaurant near the viewing deck. Kei pulled a sheaf of papers out of her bag as the waitress brought green tea ice cream sundaes for the women.

Would you like me to read you something about your father?

I thought you already read me all the bits in her diary from her trip to Okinawa?

It’s not from her diary, said Kei. When I got home, I went through the big cupboard in the tea shop office, where Father kept his documents and paperwork. Going through Auntie’s papers made me want to look through his. And I found a big pile of letters from your mother, addressed to my father. There’s lots there that will help you learn about your father. I couldn’t wait to tell you. I’m glad I can tell you face to face. May I?

Okay, said Erika. She wasn't sure. But surely her cousin, seeing her in this state, wouldn't read out anything upsetting.

Kei scanned the letter, murmuring, *'Dear Onīchan, I've been...'* hold on, let me find the right bits...ah! Here we go, this is a nice bit:

'Mike has been learning Uchināguchi and laughs that he, an American, can speak my family's traditional language better than I can. He's been teaching me a few words. He says it's important for me not to lose my heritage. Today we went to the sacred Sēfa Utaki together. He asked me if I felt anything as we walked and I told him I did. He said I had to hold on to this, for my mother's sake...' Okay, she's just talking about going out to eat with him, and so on. Kei flipped through the pile of envelopes, and pulled out a letter she'd marked with a pink post-it note. She found the right section immediately. *Right — listen*, she said.

'Mike asked if he could meet mother and I decided to bring him to the house. I was nervous, telling him they were never happy to see the Beigun in their village. He said he'd wear civilian clothes. So I took him and at first Obā was angry. The kids ran around the house calling him names, but then he started to play games with them. Something about the way he did it, and his gentleness towards Obā, speaking to her in Uchināguchi, warmed everybody's heart. By the time we left Obā said she could see he had a clean, kind heart. She even said she'd talk to father about him for me. She said he was a good match for me.'

'He really is a good man, Ken-chan. You just need to meet him and you'll see. He's not flashy, like some of the other GIs. He's so kind and gentle I can't imagine him being a soldier. The other day, when we were walking in Naha, he saw a market woman fall over with a big load of beni-imo. He ran to help her, picking them all up, and carried them to her market stall for her.'

'He wants to leave the army and find a job as an English teacher in an Okinawan primary school. He says he hates fighting and war, but says coming to Okinawa meant he found me, his future wife. He wants to stay here, he feels it's his home, and is asking me to

marry him so I can live here too. He wants to buy me an engagement ring, once he's saved up enough, with pale blue sapphires to remind me of the sea around the islands of my ancestors. He asked me to wear his military college ring until then. It's too big, so he gave me a chain so I can wear it around my neck. Ken-chan, I really want to marry Mike. Please talk to father for me. I've never been so happy. I know that if father meets him, Mike will melt even his heart.'

I wonder what happened to him, said Erika, her eyes cloudy. Are there any clues?

Not really. I went through them thoroughly. The ones she wrote from Okinawa just ask my father to mediate with our grandfather. She was so determined to marry him. He sounded like a nice man.

Was there anything about where he was from in America?

No. But you could get in touch with the military base to ask them. Oh, look, I have a surname for you. She flicked through the envelopes until she found one on which she'd written a note. Swenson. His name was Mike Swenson.

Swenson... repeated Erika, feeling the name with her lips. Erika Swenson.

“Kintsukuroi”

To repair and make beautiful what is broken, with gold

Archie stayed with her the week after their return. The trip had exhausted her; since the doctor’s strict instructions were for her to take it easy, he took care of the housework. They talked about the future, and Erika said she wanted him to stay in her life. But she also needed time to do what she had to do. He said he loved her, and that’s what he wanted her to do. Erika had said the three words back to him, but decided to wait until her heart had more room inside. His kindness reminded her of her mother’s letter about her father. She wondered if she could re-live the happiness for her mother, the way her mother had wanted to live.

At night, Archie was gentle with her; he’d been afraid, at first, of hurting her. He would trace his fingers from the dip in her throat, below the neck brace, down the centre of her belly, saying, this, here, is where the healing is happening. And when they made love it was slow, soft, so that it wouldn’t jar her, and she was filled with him, and his love for her, and thought, perhaps, in time, yes, she could.

Sarah came around to drop off casseroles for her and Mrs Mackenzie and clean. Luca made her a huge Get Well card, which Sarah stuck to the fridge. Whenever Erika shuffled over to get herself something to drink or eat, the massive moon face beamed out at her. Despite the blue and pink neck brace the stick figure was wearing, its face wore an enormous red smile. The eyes were crinkly – he had recently learned to draw sideways Cs to represent smiling eyes. Dark brown hair tumbled out the top of the bandage, and on top of it all, a huge golden crown.

The three of them had finished eating. Luca was asleep in the spare room. Quiet music played. The nights were shorter and colder, and Archie had tucked a blanket around Erika's knees.

I've decided something important, said Erika. The other two looked at her and waited.

First, I'm going to deal with my mother's bones.

What did that shaman woman tell you to do with them? asked Sarah.

She didn't have a solution. What she suggested is impossible. So I'm going to get them ground up.

Woah. Grind them?

The crematorium will do it for me. I checked.

That's kind of weird. Sarah squirmed.

They already knew about leaving cremated bones whole at Japanese funerals. It's only western cremations where bones are ground to powder.

I'm not sure I want to know this, said Archie.

Why not? It happens to all of us. And I have to face this. I can't keep those bones in the house any more. It's time I moved on.

What will you do with the ground-up bones? asked Sarah.

I'm going to scatter them, said Erika. *In the sea, in Okinawa.*

She travelled to the crematorium in northwest London on a grey November day. Archie offered to come with her, but she needed to do it alone. Once she had handed over the little urn and the undertaker had checked the death certificate, she was asked to wait in reception, where attendants well versed in professional sympathy offered her tea and biscuits. Not long afterwards, a man with a solemn face returned with the little urn in both hands. The lid had been taped back on.

Back at the flat, Erika put the urn on the Korean cabinet. She emptied the offering cup, washed it. She made a pot of *gyokurō* green tea, poured some into the cup and placed it on the altar. She took a second cup and poured *awamori* into it.

She had cooked some rice, and she put some in her mother's rice bowl, and beside it, a tangerine.

Here you go, she said. She took the sand-coloured paper the *Noro* had given her and held a match to it, watching it smoulder, then puff into flame. She held on to the paper until she couldn't any longer without burning her fingers. Dropping it into the dish she'd placed there, she watched the papers writhe and turn black, then grey, rippling as they cooled. She held a match to the black incense sticks and inserted them into the soft ash of the *kōrō*. The scent of jasmine and sandalwood rose up around her head, smoke swirling around her head. She tapped the wooden stick, softly, twice, on the bronze bowl on its brocade cushion. Putting the stick down, she put her hands together, closed her eyes, bowed her head.

Mama. I'm home, safe and sound. I met a Noro in Okinawa. I'm going back there. I'm taking your ashes with me.

She picked up the crystal Bodhisattva and polished it with her shirt and, smiling, returned it to its place beside a photograph of Michiko, her mother. She was beautiful.

That evening Erika cooked herself a simple meal of rice, miso, pickles and grilled fish. She wasn't sure why she chose her mother's rice bowl over hers. It felt right. As she ate, she played with the smooth round stone she found again in the rucksack she'd taken with her to Okinawa. As she ate, she turned it over and over in her hands. She thought of the waterfall and felt no fear.

It was as she went to put it back down on the table that she dropped the stone. It fell with a resonant, hollow sound on the edge of her mother's rice bowl. And as it landed on the table, the rice bowl fell open, splitting into two perfect halves.

“Ashita Wa Ashita No Kaze Ga Fuku”

Tomorrow, tomorrow's wind will blow

*

There was something comforting about airports. Not the hustle and bustle of the arrivals hall, or ranks of check-in desks; it was once she'd passed through customs and immigration and into the muffled innards of the airport that Erika felt a kind of peace. Still on British soil, but no longer in Britain, she was in no country. She looked up to check how long until boarding. She had some time still to go.

Archie, Sarah and Luca had waved her off. She was going for three months, but she waved goodbye through a veil of tears. Archie enveloped her in his arms at the entrance to the security area; they lingered until they were asked to move on by airport officials.

The urn was in her bag. She felt she needed it with her. It was small and took up little space. And it was empty.

Packing the day before, she had sat with it on the bed, figuring out whether to pack it in her suitcase or carry it with her. She removed the brocade cover and opened the pine box, taking out the granite urn. Then she had peeled away the sticky tape around its lid and lifted it off. She was shocked how little ash was inside. The small gritty pile had spread across the bottom of the urn, barely amounting to a teaspoonful. That was all there was. She peered inside for some time, and when she began to cry, she felt she could not stop. She didn't care if anyone heard her; she opened her mouth, taking deep breaths and howling each one out, tears plopping onto her trousers.

She loved Michiko. She had always loved her, and her heart keened for her. All Erika had ever wanted to do was crawl back inside her, to start again, to undo all that happened and make everything all right. In an alternative universe, her mother was happy and well, living a

life full of love with an American who promised her the sun, a man who honoured her and made up for all the wartime privations and horrors of her childhood.

A fat tear splashed onto her fingers holding the urn, and down into the ashes. She reached in to wipe the wet away, but her fingers were soaked with tears and the ashes stuck to her skin. She put her fingers in her mouth. The ashes were gritty between her teeth and tasted of nothing. She touched the ashes again. Again, she put her finger in her mouth, swallowed. The grittiness made her wince. But she kept going, and she wept, licking, dipping and swallowing until there was nothing left in the urn.

Nobody else would ever know. It was an act of love, of revenge, of redemption. Through Erika's eyes, Michiko might see the place where she had once known happiness. Wherever she went, Erika would have her mother close, and where once she had been a part of her mother, her mother was now a part of her.

The airport tannoy announced a familiar number. Erika's flight was boarding. She collected her bag from the floor by her feet and got up. Deep and low within her belly: alchemy. She didn't know it yet, but inside her, new life stirred.