

# **The Sentence**

**by**

**Stephanie Scott**

**It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll.  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.**

**WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY**

# Prologue

Sarashima is a beautiful name; a name that now belongs only to me. I was not born with it, this name, but I have chosen to take it, because before me it belonged to my mother.

It is customary upon meeting someone to explain who you are and where you come from, but whether you realise it or not, you already know me and you know my story. Look closely. Reach into the far corners of your mind and sift through the news clippings, bulletins and other snippets of information there. You will see me. I am the line at the end of an article; I am the final sentence ending with a full stop.

### **Wakaresaseya Agent Goes Too Far?**

By Yu Yamada. Published: 18.30pm, 05/05/1994

The trial of Takashi Nakamura, the man accused of murdering 30-year old Rina Satō, began today at the Tokyo District Court.

The case has attracted international attention due to the fact that the defendant, Mr Nakamura, is an agent in the Wakaresaseya or so-called 'marriage break-up' industry, and has admitted that he was hired by the victim's husband, Osamu Satō, to seduce Rina Satō and provide grounds for divorce.

Nakamura claims that he and the deceased fell in love and were planning to start a new life together. If convicted of murder Nakamura faces a minimum 20 year prison sentence; the judges may even consider the death penalty.

Rina Satō's father told reporters:

'I will never forgive my son-in-law for bringing this man into our lives, or the industry itself. A profession that preys on the lives of people should not be allowed to function in Tokyo.'

Rina Satō is survived by a daughter of seven years old.

When did you first read this? Can you remember? Were you at home at your breakfast table or in the office, scanning the morning news? I can see your face as you read about my family; your brows drew together in a slight frown, a crinkle formed above your nose. You shook your head and reached for a slice of toast – cold – it had hardened on the plate while you were reading the article. The smell of coffee was strong and reassuring in the air. Eventually, you smiled and turned the page. The world is full of strange things.

Wakaresaseya was not common in Japan when Takashi was drawn into my mother's life. The industry emerged out of a demand for its services, a demand that exists all over the world today. Look at the people around you: those you love, those who love you, those who want what you have. They can enter your life as easily as he entered mine.

Do you remember where we first met, you and I? Was it in *The Telegraph*, *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*? My story stopped there in the foreign press. Later articles focused on the marriage-break-up industry itself and the agents who populate it, but none of them mentioned me. Lives to be rebuilt are always less interesting than lives destroyed. Even in Japan, I disappeared from the page.

# Part One

When you look at the world with knowledge, you realize that things are unchangeable  
and at the same time are constantly being transformed.

MISHIMA

# Sumiko

### **What's in a Name?**

For the Sarashima, the naming of a child is a family matter. For me, it marked a bond with tradition that would govern my life. The names of my maternal koseki have always been chosen at Kiyoji in Ebisu. You can just about glimpse the temple from the park at the end of our street. It sits at the base of a hill in the very centre of our neighbourhood; the green peaks of its roof tiles gleam in the sun and the red pillars of the portico peer out over the surrounding buildings.

As I grew up, my grandfather told me that our family have worshipped here since coming to Tokyo. He said that they remained at prayer during the bombing of the city and returned after the war to restore the temple. For him, it is a symbol of regeneration.

This is why, six days into my life, instead of gathering around the kami-dana in the north east corner of the kitchen, I was carried in my mother's arms beneath the gates and into the heart of the temple complex.

As we climbed the stone steps leading to the main hall, my mother glanced up at the sprawling wooden roof, at its curved eaves stretching out beyond the building - shutting out the sunlight - and resulting in the cool, dark shadows within. Inside, we proceeded through the sweet smoke of the incense to the altar. All around us the wind blew through in gusts and the air swirled, while outside the bronze bells of the surrounding temples began to toll.

I don't remember this journey, but I can see it quite clearly: me in my cream blanket, my father carrying Tora, the toy white tiger that Grandpa had given to me, and my grandfather himself, grave, in his three-piece suit. I have been told this story so many times it has seeped into my memory.

Before the altar, one of the monks, pale in his purple robes, bowed to my grandfather and took from him a pouch containing a selection of names. My mother had prepared these

names, first consulting the astrologer and then choosing her favourite three, counting the strokes of the characters to ensure that each name, combined with our surname, would add up to an optimal number.

I can see her sitting at our dining table in her house slippers and jeans, an oversized T-shirt covering the bump where I had been. The blinds were open, the sun slanting across the marble floors of our home, while in the kitchen the rice cooker bubbled and the washing up dried on the draining board. My mother laid the sheets of hanshi, rice paper, out in front of her and turned to the stone suzuri of charcoal ink by her side. I can see her dip her brush into the ink, smell the rich scent of earth rising into the air as using just the tip of the brush she pressed down, the horsehair bending with the pressure to create the first fluid stroke.

The monk bowed and placed the names in a shallow dish upon the altar. Kneeling before them he selected a thin bamboo fan. Then in unison with the breeze that drifted through the open screens he unfurled the fan, whipping up currents of air. Everyone was silent. The grey smoke of the incense drifted towards the rafters as one by one, the names painted by my mother flew towards the ceiling. Eventually, one remained, alone on the teak surface.

## 寿美子

Grandpa knelt and picked it up from the altar and a smile broke out on his face. “Sumiko,” he said. “Sumiko Sarashima.”

My father had been silent throughout the proceedings. In the weeks leading up to my birth, plans for an ‘adoptive’ ceremony had been discussed. Under Japanese law, both people in a marriage must share the same surname, but in certain circumstances, a husband may take his wife’s surname and join her household, so that her name and her line may continue. My

father was a second son and his family, the Satōs, had readily agreed. However, that day as the priest took out the register of the temple and began to inscribe my name on a fresh new page, my father spoke:

“Satō,” he said. “She is a Satō, not a Sarashima.”

## **What I Know**

I was raised by my grandfather, Yoshi Sarashima.

I lived with him in a white house in Meguro, Tokyo.

In the evenings he would read to me.

He told me every story but my own.

My grandfather was a lawyer; he was careful in his speech. Even when we were alone together in his study and I would sit on his lap, tracing the creases in his leather armchair, even then, he had a precision with words. I have kept faith with that precision to this day.

Grandpa read everything to me – Mishima, Sartre, Dumas, Basho, tales of his youth and duck hunting in Shimoda and one book, *The Trial*, that became my favourite. The story begins like this: “Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K.”

When we read that line for the first time, Grandpa explained to me that the story we were reading was a translation. I was ten years old, stretching out my fingers for a world beyond my own and I reached out then to the yellowed page, stroking the kanji that spoke of something new. I formed the sentences in my mouth, summoning the figure of Josef K: a lonely man, a man people would tell lies about.

As I grew older, I began to argue with Grandpa about *The Trial*. He told me other people fought over it too, that they fight about it even today – over the translation of one word in particular – “verlumdēt”. To tell a lie. In some versions of the story, this word is translated as “slander”. Slander speaks of courts and accusations, of public reckoning, it has none of the childhood resonance of “telling lies”. And yet, when I read this story for the first time, it was the use of “telling lies” that fascinated me.

Lies, when they are first told have a shadow quality to them, a gossamer texture that can wrap around a life. They have that feather-light essence of childhood and my childhood was built on lies.

The summer before my mother died, we went to the sea. When I look back on that time, those months hold a sense of finality for me - not because that was the last holiday that my mother and I would take together but because it is the site of my last true memory.

Every year, as the August heat engulfed Tokyo, my family piled their suitcases onto a local train and headed for the coast. We went to Shimoda. Father remained in the city to work, but Grandpa Sarashima would accompany us. Every time, he stopped at the same kiosk in the station to buy frozen clementines for the train and in the metallic heat of the carriage, Mama and I would wait impatiently for the fruit to soften so we could get at the pockets of sorbet within. Finally, when our chins were sticky with juice, Mama would turn to me in our little row of two and ask what I would like to do by the sea, just her and I, alone.

Our house on the peninsula was old, its wooden gateposts warped by the winds that peeled off the Pacific. As we climbed towards the rocky promontory at the top of the hill, the gates, dark and encrusted with salt, signalled that my home was near: Washikura - Eagle's Nest; the house overlooking the bay, between Mount Fuji and the sea.

My country is built around mountains, its people are piled up in concrete boxes, cages. To have land is rare, but the house in Shimoda had belonged to my family since before the war and afterwards my grandfather fought to keep it when everything else was lost.

Forest sweeps over the hills above the house. I was not allowed up there alone as a child and so when I looked at my mother on the train that summer she knew immediately what I would ask for. In the afternoons, Mama and I climbed high on the wooded slopes

above Washikura. We watched the tea fields as they darkened before autumn. We lay back on the rocky black soil and breathed in the sharp resin of the pines. Some days, we heard the call of a sea eagle as it circled overhead.

Grandpa knew the forest but he never found us there. At four o'clock each afternoon, he would venture to the base of the hillside and call to us through the trees. He shouted our names: "Rina!" "Sumi!" Together, we nestled amongst the pines, giggling, as grandfather's voice wavered and fell.

I often heard Grandpa calling before Mama did, but I always waited for her signal to be quiet. On our last afternoon in the forest, I lay still, feeling the soft and steady puff of my mother's breath against my face. She pulled me against her and her breathing quieted and slowed. I opened my eyes and stared at her, at the dark lashes against her cheeks. I took in her pallor, her stillness. I heard my grandfather begin to call, his voice thin and distant. I snuggled closer, kissing her face, pushing through the coldness with my breath. Suddenly, she smiled, her eyes still closed, and pressed a finger to her lips.

We no longer own our home, Washikura, on the outskirts of Shimoda; Grandpa sold it years ago. But when I go there today, climbing up through the undergrowth, I can feel my mother there beneath the trees. When I lie down on the ground, the pine needles sharp under my cheek, I imagine that the chill of the breeze is the stroke of her finger.

# Rina

## **Atami**

Rina stood in the garden of Washikura and looked out at the slopes and mountains stretching towards Mount Fuji, at the deep shadows forming across the forested hills. She thought of how the plates which had created the peninsula had converged at Fuji-san millions of years ago, causing a land of volcanoes, earthquakes and hot springs to rise from the sea.

The volcano was still active, she knew. On a clear day one could see vapour and smoke curling above the snow-covered peak, hinting at the new islands, plateaus and peninsulas waiting within. But that summer, as Rina watched the slopes before her turn gradually from lime green to pomegranate to rust, she did not think of what was to come, she thought about her daughter kneeling beside Grandpa Yoshi in the garden, digging into the dark soil of the azaleas with her trowel, her face sullenly turned away from her mother. Rina looked up at the mountains watching over them and beneath their quiet gaze she climbed into her red Fiat and drove to Atami.

At the crowded beachfront Rina stopped and looked for a space to park. Atami had become a place for pleasure-seekers. Salarimen flocked to its beaches, eager to supplement their existence in Tokyo with summer condos, shopping malls and karaoke. Hotels capitalised on the natural hot springs and buildings replaced the trees. Soon, the forests of camphor and ferns that had once surrounded the town were cut back, until little trace of them remained. Rina left her car at the end of the beach and walked back along the waterfront, shading her eyes against the glare of the sun as it glanced off the concrete.

“You came!”

At the sound of his voice, Rina turned. Takashi was walking across the beach towards her, barefoot in the sand. She smiled and watched his slow, loping stride.

“I was afraid you’d stood me up,” he said as he reached her.

“You weren’t afraid.”

“I am when you’re not with me,” he replied.

Rina laughed and they began to walk towards the yachts bobbing against the blue of the sea. She stopped by an ice cream stall advertising azuki, red bean. At her side, Takashi passed his sandals from one hand to the other and reached into his pocket for some change.

“Just one, onegai shimasu.”

Rina smiled at him. “My daughter loves these,” she said as she bit into the ice cream, savouring the caramel sweetness of the beans. “I wish I could take her some.” She felt Takashi’s eyes upon her and lowered her gaze.

“We can bring Sumiko here,” he said.

“Impossible.” Rina shifted as he stepped behind her. She felt the warmth of him at her back, his breath at her ear.

“We can do anything,” he said. “Yoshi won’t notice if we took her for an afternoon.”

“What will I tell her when this ends?”

“It won’t end Rina.”

He drew her back against his chest and she dug her toes deep into the white sand, feeling the tiny grains sift between her red sandals and her skin.

“I should go,” she said, but her sentence ended in a shriek as he lifted her up into the air and over his shoulder.

“Oh my god!” she hissed, hitting at him with her fists. “What are you doing?” Rina gasped as her ice cream fell into the sand.

“There are too many people here,” he said. “We can’t talk.”

“What are you, a child?”

Takashi grinned against her, “You bring out the worst in me.”

“People are staring.”

“I don’t care,” he said. And it was true, she thought, he really didn’t.

They reached his car and he put her down. Rina could feel the blush rising in her cheeks; people were still looking at them. Takashi placed his palms on either side of her face, holding her head in his hands. “Rina,” he said, “you’re with me today. Try to concentrate.”

She took a deep breath and looked up at him. “I don’t have long.”

Rina caught glimpses of the view as they drove up into the hills above the town, following a narrow road that wove between the pines. The sea was a deep blue against the concrete of the bay and along the slopes she could see the cypresses and cedars settling along the fringes of Atami, as though they would one day reclaim it.

They drove to a parking spot where a stone path led up into the hillside. Rina tied her hair back with a handkerchief to protect it from the wind, then she joined Takashi on the slope. Together they climbed up into an orchard of natsumikan trees, the giant oranges hung low and heavy against the dark green shells of the leaves. Takashi found a spot for them in the grass and spread out the macintosh he had brought from the car - it was beige in the mold of New York detectives and Rina smiled, she liked to tease him about it. A few minutes later, however, as the cool of the breeze settled against the back of her neck, she felt a thread of unease. She had committed herself by coming with him. He wanted more from her, of that she was sure. Rina shifted away from him, pulling her skirt down over her knees. She sat back on his coat as Takashi dug into his satchel.

Takashi looked up at her; he must have seen the nerves on her face but he just smiled, his right hand reaching to the bottom of the bag while Rina pressed her nails into the flesh of her palm.

“I brought this for you,” Takashi said.

She turned to look at the object he held in his hands: a Canon EOS 3500. Surprise pushed through her anxiety. She’d seen one in the back streets of Akihabara, looked at it in catalogues, but she had never held one.

“Go on,” Takashi said. “Take it. I thought we could do some work while we’re up here.”

“Work?”

“Don’t you think it’s time?”

Rina turned away. He brought this up persistently - the possibility that she might return to the career she’d once planned, but she was afraid, if you neglected something for long enough didn’t it die?

“I found your monograph, Rina,” he said. “The one you published in *The Workshop*?”

Rina bit her lip. “That was experimenting.”

“It doesn’t read that way,” he said.

“I wrote it after I left the law program at Todai. Father threw every copy out of the house.”

“I can get you a copy.”

“No need,” she said and she looked at him then. “I remember it.”

Silently, he handed her the camera.

They moved through the orchard and lay down on the sheets of leaves. Rina watched him, her eyes following the speed of his movements, his fingers nimble as they slid across the bevel of the lens, selecting apertures, accentuating the natural palette of the hillside. For half an hour she remained still beside him, enjoying the rapid click of the shutter, feeling the weight of a camera in her palm. Then, slowly, she lifted the viewfinder of her Canon to see what he could see.

They finished shooting in colour and then gauging the light and shadows of the afternoon switched to monochrome film, drawing the shapes of the leaves out through the filters of black and white. She turned to find Takashi propped up on his elbow watching her; he was waiting for her to take her shot. Rina narrowed her eyes at him and he grinned, twisting the lens off his camera. She leaned towards him, watching as he reached into his satchel and drew out a new lens, holding it out to her, describing how he would capture the light drifting down to them.

Later, sitting barefoot on the grass, Rina reached out and plucked an orange from a branch. Takashi settled beside her as she split the bright skin and pith of the fruit open with her thumb nail, releasing tiny droplets of zest into the air. She pulled it apart and handed half to him, sucking the sour liquid off her palm. As the sun sank lower on the horizon, Rina leant back against his shoulder. She rested her cheek on the ridge of his collarbone and watched the light flickering between the trees.

A droplet of water fell onto Rina's hair followed by two more. It was not until the shower broke through the leaves that she rose to her feet. The storm had crept up on them. It was that way in the mountains, the undergrowth beckoned to the moisture in the air.

Takashi threw his coat over both of them and she grabbed her sandals as they scrambled down the slope, awash with wet leaves, to the car. Streams of water cascaded

down the windows and a white fog materialised over the hills, flattening the mountains into two dimensions before rendering them invisible. Neither of them turned the radio on, they sat in the silence as Takashi took her hand, interlacing his fingers with hers.

“I came third in the Noguchi Photography Prize,” he said. “They’re going to feature one of my pieces in an exhibition. Will you come?”

“Where is it?” Rina asked, turning her head to look at him.

“A warehouse in Akiba. If the art isn’t to your taste I can always take you to Kanda Yabu Soba.”

Rina smiled; he was so cunningly aware of her obsession with food.

“Don’t mention the duck soba,” she said, warning him off with her hand.

“It would mean a lot to me if you would come,” he said.

She looked at him and the laughter faded from her eyes. “Then I will.”

The rain slowed to a drizzle and eventually stopped as the evening drew on. They got out of the car and approached the rails lining the road; they could see the sea emerging through the wisps of mist that lingered on the hillside.

Takashi put his arms around her, rubbing her shoulders to ward off the chill. “I should go,” she said, but this time she was reluctant to leave. “Kash,” she turned towards him, “about today...”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

“Thank you.”

He brushed her hair away from her face, untying the damp handkerchief that held it in place. Rina watched as he put it in his pocket and she let him take it.

“I love you,” he said.

Rina shifted in his arms, she tried to say something, but Takashi shook his head and placed his fingers over her lips; his skin was rough where it touched her mouth.

“I do.”

# Sumiko

## **Tokyo**

My mother was a photographer, before she became a wife. Each year when we went to the sea, Mama would play with me on the beach taking roll after roll of film and Grandpa would send them off to Kodak to be made into kodachrome slides. In the autumn, as the leaves darkened and we returned to Tokyo, my mother would open a bottle of Coca Cola at Grandpa's home in Meguro and we would watch the slides all at once on the projector.

I still have them, these home movies of sorts; they are in the basement of the Meguro house, filed away in narrow leather boxes. Sometimes I go down there to look at the slides. They are beautiful, each one a rectangular jewel encased in white card. I can see my mother in miniature biting the cone of an ice-cream; me in the sand with my red bucket, my swimming costume damp from the sea; Grandpa sheltering under an umbrella, even though he is already in the shade.

I have other memories too, but they are not of Shimoda. These appear to me as glimpses and flashes. In my mind's eye, the line of the coast straightens, the rocky inlets of Shimoda are replaced by an open harbour and I hear the slap of my feet on concrete as I run and run. There are moments of clarity, liquid scenes: I see a yacht on the waves, its sails stretched taut; I feel strong arms lifting me into the air; I turn away from the flash of a camera lens in the sun; a man's hand offers me a cone of red bean ice cream, a man with long elegant fingers that do not belong to my father.

I have never found these images in my grandfather's basement nor have I seen that harbour in any of our photographs. But sometimes, I wake in the night to the caramel scent of red beans. A breeze lingers in the air and there is an echo of people talking in the distance, but perhaps it is only the whirl of the ceiling fan and the scent of Hannae's azuki buns left to cool in the kitchen.

I asked Grandpa once about these memories of mine. He said I was remembering Shimoda. When I continued to look at him, he laughed and motioned for me to sit beside him on the stool by his chair. He reached for a pile of books stacked on the edge of his shelves, his fingers tracing the hardbacks, paperbacks and volumes of poetry. “Which one will it be today?” he asked.

I was standing in my grandfather’s study when the lies that wrapped around my life began to unravel. I was due to give a talk on ‘Careers in the Law’ to the final year students at Todai and I was dressed in a navy suit, my hair pulled back from my face in a pinned chignon; immaculate but late, for I had lost my notes.

I leaned over my grandfather’s desk, casting the papers into disorder. I had passed the Japanese Bar a year before and now my legal apprenticeship with the Supreme Court in Wakō City was drawing to a close. I had just completed the final exams and so all my cases from the long months of rotations with Judges, Public Prosecutors, and Attorneys were stacked across every surface. Grandpa had gone to stay at an onsen with friends, but long before that he had ceded his office to me, too delighted by my professional choices and the job offers which followed to question the invasion.

Crossing to the leather armchair in the corner of the room, I leafed through the files I’d left on the seat. Following my long daily commute home from Wakō, I often fell asleep reading there. In the past year I had taken on extra cases in an effort to stand out from the other trainees and I’d worked hard to build up my network among the attorneys and prosecutors. Finally, however, the lack of sleep was catching up with me.

I was kneeling on the floor, my hand outstretched towards a sheaf of papers that might have been my notes, when the phone started to ring. My life was in that room: certificates from childhood and university; the framed newspaper article on Grandpa’s most famous case;

the folder on current events which he kept for me. Each morning, Grandpa would sit at the breakfast table, sipping his favourite cold noodles and cutting clippings from the day's news so I would not get caught out. I had read every article, every story in that room, except mine. I was so caught up in the paraphernalia of my current life that I almost didn't hear it.

“Hello?” I said, picking up the phone.

“Good afternoon” the voice said. It was hesitant, female. “May I speak to Sarashima-san?”

I was distracted and so I mumbled into the handset, glancing around the room. “I'm afraid he is in Osaka at the moment, what is this regarding?”

“Is this the home of Mr. Yoshitake Sarashima?”

“Yes,” I repeated. “I am his granddaughter, Sumiko. How can I help?”

“Is this the household and family of Mrs Rina Satō?”

“My mother is dead,” I replied, focusing on the phone and the person at the other end of the line. There was silence. For a moment I thought that the girl with the hesitant voice had hung up, but then I heard her take a breath. Over the earpiece she said “I am calling from the Ministry of Justice, on behalf of the Prison Service. I am very sorry to tell you, Miss Satō, my call is regarding Takashi Nakamura.”

“Who is that?” I asked.

As my voice travelled into the silence, the line went dead.

## **Bells**

*The bell - is it Ueno?*

*Is it Asakusa?*

BASHO

People are fond of saying that you can't un-ring a bell; that words once spoken hang in the air with a life of their own. In the last year of my mother's life, my grandfather started taking me to a temple in the city. The hum of the crowds surrounded us as Grandpa and I made our way towards Senso-ji. As we walked I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of burning leaves and incense and tugged at Grandpa's coat. He looked down and lifted me into his arms, continuing to walk through the market. It was a new ritual of ours, this weekly visit. He lifted me higher onto his hip, tucking my yellow skirt around my legs. I chattered to him as we walked, pointing out the things which caught my eye. There were over one hundred stalls stretching between the beginning of the avenue and Senso-ji, and there was another arcade running east to west but he always chose this approach because I liked it best; it contained my favourite treats.

"Manjū!" I demanded, pointing to a stall selling deep-fried jam buns. In yam, cherry, sweet potato or chocolate, I loved them all, but I lived for the red bean. "Manjū, Ojisan," I repeated. Already a large queue was forming, spreading out beyond the store several lanes wide. People shoved to get closer as flavour by flavour the hot buns were lined up beneath the counter. A stocky middle-aged woman stood in the centre of the crowd moving sales along; she would push people forward and then shove them away as soon as they collected their buns, almost in one fluid motion.

I pointed at a tray of crispy manjū, but Grandpa shook his head. "Red bean!" I squealed.

“Later Sumiko,” Grandpa said while I tugged at his hair in annoyance.

“Did you bring Mummy here?”

“Yes, when she was small,” Grandpa replied shifting me on his hip. I was getting too big to carry, but he didn’t seem to mind. He said he wanted to remember me at this age.

“Where is Mummy?” I asked.

“She’s shopping.”

“Why didn’t she take me?”

“I wanted to spend time with you.”

“I want - ”

“I brought your mother here when she was just your age,” he continued as I began to lean away from him again towards the bun stall.

“Sumichan!” Grandpa put me down on the ground. “Temple first” he scolded, and held out his hand for me to take. In the midst of the crowds, I pressed against his legs and my fingers tangled with his; I did not like to be surrounded by the other people and tourists. I was quiet as we walked towards the great red pillars of the first courtyard with their giant sandals made of straw. The sound of the great bell reverberated in the distance: as each new person stepped up to pray there was a pause as the cedar beam was pulled back and then released, followed by the mellow vibrations of the bronze.

Weaving through the throng, Grandpa made his way towards the incense burner in front of the temple. As we walked he told me that the smoke of the charcoal had always reminded him not of purification, but of my mother, smaller than me, washing herself in the waves while he held her up, her hair tied with white satin bows, her petticoats showing through her Sunday dress.

“Are you ready to go in?” Grandpa asked and I nodded, contrite. As he lifted me onto his hip once more, I smiled at him and he found a place for us in front of the cast-iron cauldron billowing smoke into the air. I leaned in and as Grandpa wafted the incense towards me I pretended to wash in it, scrubbing my face and hands.

“Are you pure now?” Grandpa asked. “Are you sure?” he teased. “No more naughty little girl?” He laughed when I smiled sweetly at him. “I know what you would like to do,” he said, “you would like to see your fortune.”

This too was a ritual of ours. Every time we came to Senso-ji, before Grandpa said his prayers in the main temple, he would take me to the bureau of the three hundred drawers. He gave me a coin to throw between the slots and together we listened to the metal as it tumbled and fell into the donation box. Then he handed me a cylinder filled with long, slender sticks and let me shake it back and forth until one of them fell out.

Lifting the stick, I looked at the writing carved into the wood and we searched for a matching symbol on a drawer. When I had found it, Grandpa reached inside and took the first sheet of paper off the pile. Then he handed it to me; I liked to be the first one to read the fortunes.

Grandpa watched as I shaped the words in my mouth, reading the riddle aloud. I loved these predictions. Even in the mountains I would ask Grandpa to buy them for me from the vending machines by the ski slopes. That day when I had finished reading, I was not sure what the fortune meant and I held out the paper to my grandfather. Grandpa smiled, giving me a slight bow, and murmured that he was glad to be of service. “What do we have here?” he asked, scanning the symbols, looking for the scale of luck in the top right hand corner. He lifted the paper higher and I heard his intake of breath. He turned away from me and I could see him reaching for the wire which hung above the drawers, the wire where all the fortunes

he would not read to me were hung. There were several there that day, idly flapping in the wind.

I stepped forward as he was looking for twine with which to tie up the paper and snatched the fortune from his hand.

“What does it mean?” I asked, peering at the symbols once again.

“We don’t want this one,” he said. “Let’s tie it up, so the wind can blow it away.”

“I want to know,” I said stepping away from him, holding the paper in my hands.

“Sumichan, give it to me. This one belongs to the wind.”

“Tell!” I said, crumpling the thin sheet in my fist.

Grandpa reached for my hand and began to pry my fingers open. “Come on Sumiko, I’ll get you another,” he said, but his eyes widened in horror as I shoved the wisp of paper into my mouth and began to chew.

Some words are buried, even burned, but over the years they re-emerge, ringing out like temple bells, rising above the din.