

**What's Left Of Me
Is Yours**

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 once 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 tabloid crimes tucked away 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, 05/16/1994

The trial of Kaitarō Nakamura, the man accused of murdering 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 his wife, 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, Mr Sarashima, told reporters:

'A business such as this which destroys peoples' lives should not be allowed to operate in Tokyo. Rina was my only child and the heart of our family. I shall never get over her loss, nor forgive it.'

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

Can you remember when you first read this? 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. Perhaps the smell of coffee was strong and reassuring in the air and eventually you shook your head and turned the page. The world is full of strange things.

Wakaresaseya was not common in Japan when Kaitarō 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 know now when we first met or where? 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

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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 relatives have always been chosen at Kiyoji in Meguro. 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 had worshipped here since coming to Tokyo. He said that they remained at prayer during the fire-bombing of the city and that after the war they restored the temple. For him, it is a symbol of regeneration.

This is why, as soon as Mama had recovered from my birth, instead of gathering around the kami-dana in the eastern corner of the living room, my family went to Kiyoji and my mother carried me in her 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 - resulting in the cool, dark shadows within. Inside, we proceeded through the sweet smoke of 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 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.

One of the monks, pale in his indigo 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 first name, combined with our surname, would add up to an optimal number.

I can still see her sitting at our dining table in her house slippers and jeans, an oversized T-shirt covering the bump that was me. The blinds are 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 lays the sheets of rice paper out in front of her and turns to the inkstone by her side. I can see her dip her brush into the ink, smell the rich scent of earth and pine soot rising into the air, as using the very tip of the bristles she pressed down, the horsehair bending to create the first fluid stroke.

The monk bowed once more and placed the names in a shallow dish upon the altar. Then, kneeling before them, he selected a delicate wooden fan and, in unison with the breeze that drifted through the open screens, unfurled it, 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 upon his face as he read the characters of my name: celebration, beauty, child.

“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, readily agreed. However, that day, as the priest took out a fresh sheet of paper and began to write out my name, 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, or later, when I sat on a stool by his side, 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, Tolstoy, 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 was telling lies about Josef K.

When we read that line for the first time, Grandpa explained that the story was a translation. I was twelve years old, stretching out my fingers for a world beyond my own and I reached out then to the yellowed page, stroking the written characters that spoke of something new. I read the opening aloud, 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 - "verleumdet". 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 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 come with us. Each 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.

Japan is built around mountains, 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 across the slopes and mountains stretching towards Mount Fuji, at the deep shadows forming on the forested hills. She thought of how the plates which created this 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 turned sullenly away from her mother. Rina looked up at the mountains watching over them and beneath their quiet gaze she climbed into her red Nissan 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. Salarymen 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 long ago replaced the trees. The forests of camphor and ferns that once surrounded the town were all 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. Kaitarō 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, Kaitarō passed his sandals from one hand to the other and reached into his pocket for some change.

“Just one, please.”

Rina smiled at him. “My daughter loves these,” she said as she bit into the ice cream, savouring the caramel sweetness of the beans. She felt Kaitarō’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.

“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 shouldn’t be here,” 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?”

Kaitarō 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. Kaitarō placed his palms on either side of her face. “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 bobbed hair back with a handkerchief to protect it from the wind and then she joined Kaitarō on the slope. Together they climbed up into an orchard of natsumikan trees, the summer oranges hung low and heavy against the dark green shells of the leaves. Kaitarō 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, a great deal more, of that she was sure. Rina shifted away from him, pulling her skirt down over her knees. She sat further back on the coat as he dug into his satchel.

Kaitarō 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,” he said.

She turned towards him 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,” he 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 photography career she'd once planned, but she was afraid, if you neglected something for long enough didn't it die?

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

Rina bit her lip. “That was experimenting.”

“It doesn't read that way.”

“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 the camera in her palm. Then, slowly, she lifted the viewfinder of her Canon to see what he could see.

They finished photographing 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 Kaitarō 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 could capture the light drifting down to them.

Later, sitting barefoot on the grass, Rina reached out and plucked an orange from a branch. Kaitarō settled beside her as she split the bright skin and pith of the fruit open with her thumbnail, 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. Kaitarō threw his coat over both of them and she grabbed her sandals as they scrambled down the slope, awash with wet leaves, to his 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 Kaitarō 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 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.”

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

The rain slowed to a drizzle and 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.

Kaitarō put his arms around her, rubbing her shoulders to ward off the chill. “I should go,” she said, but now she was reluctant to leave. “Kai,” 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 he shook his head, placing his fingers over her lips; his skin was rough where it touched her mouth.

“I do.”

What's Left Of Me Is Yours by Stephanie Scott

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. 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 bright sun glinting off a camera lens; 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 whir of the ceiling fan and the scent of buns left to cool in the kitchen, which Hannae, Grandpa's housekeeper, once taught me to make.

I asked Grandpa once about these memories of mine. He said I was remembering our summers in 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.

Years later, I was once again standing in my grandfather’s study when the lies that had wrapped around my life finally 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 in a sleek ponytail; immaculate but late, for I had lost my notes.

I remember that I was leaning over Grandpa’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 offer from Nomura & Higashino 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, but the lack of sleep was finally 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 before work, 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 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 Mr Sarashima?"

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

"Is this the home of Mr Yoshi 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 disturb you, Miss Satō, but my call is regarding Kaitarō Nakamura."

"Who is that?" I asked.

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

People say 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, Grandpa started taking me to a temple in the city. The hum of the crowds surrounded us as we made our way towards Sensoji. 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 Sensoji, 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, Grandpa," I repeated. Already a large queue was forming, spreading out beyond the store several lanes wide. People jostled one another, trying 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 pushed people forward and then would shove them away again as soon as they collected their buns, almost in one fluid motion.

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

"Later Sumiko," he said while I pulled at his hair in annoyance.

"Did you bring Mummy here?"

"Yes, when she was small," Grandpa replied shifting me on his hip. I was perhaps 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 - ”

“Your mother and I started coming here when she was just as old as you are now,” 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 passed beneath the Thunder Gate, but as we approached the red pillars of the inner gate with their giant hanging sandals made of straw, I stretched to see if I could catch a glimpse of the great bell. It was one of the bells of time. My mother said that even the poet Basho, hundreds of years ago, had heard it tolling through fields of flowers. For back then, when Tokyo was still Edo, the whole city was governed by these chimes which told the people when to rise, eat and sleep. Now the great bell was heard only at 6am each morning and on the first midnight of the New Year when it was rung 108 times for each of the 108 worldly desires that are said to enslave mankind. Grandpa had taken Mama and I to see it. His friends on the local board had secured us a place very near the bell and even now I could feel each reverberation in the air, the silent pause while the cedar beam was drawn 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 emanating from it had always reminded him not of purification, but of my mother as a child 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. He lifted me onto his hip once more and I smiled at him as he found a place for us in front of the huge burnished cauldron billowing smoke into the air. I leaned in and Grandpa wafted the incense towards me as 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 Sensoji, before Grandpa said his prayers in the main temple, he would take me to the bureau of the one 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 fell out.

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

Grandpa watched as I shaped the words in my mouth, reading the fortune 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, but that day, when I had finished reading, I was not sure what the fortune meant and I held out the paper to my grandfather. He 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 looking at the wire which hung above the drawers, the wire where all the fortunes he would not explain to me were hung. There were several there that day, idly flapping in the wind.

I stepped forward as he tried to fold the fortune into a strip so he could tie it around the wire but as he fumbled with the paper I snatched it from his hands.

“What does it mean?” I asked, peering at the symbols and characters 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 back from him, holding the fortune 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. Words may be buried, some are even burned, but over the years they re-emerge, ringing out like temple bells, rising above the din.