

## Endurance

*Yasegaman: The combination of yaseru (to become skinny) and gaman-suru (to endure) literally means to endure until one becomes emaciated, or endurance for the sake of pride. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict once said that Japanese culture is based on shame while American culture is based on a sense of sin or guilt. In a shame-oriented society, for persons to lose face is to have their ego destroyed. For example, in olden days, samurai warriors were proud people. When they were too poor to eat, they held a toothpick in their mouth to pretend they had just eaten a meal.*

Even the kindness of the half-light could not hide his disfigurement. The man stood on my doorstep hunched against the chill of a winter morning. Despite the scarring, I could tell he was Japanese, in his forties or fifties. I had seen such burns before, blacker versions, in another life. He wore a suit, no coat, and held a briefcase in fingers fused together. He bowed his bald head low, cleared his throat and apologised for the intrusion. Years had passed since I last heard it but the southern Kyushu dialect was unmistakable. He asked if my name was Amaterasu Takahashi and, despite my apprehension, I nodded. The muscles in his face twitched, perhaps in a smile. 'Then I bring you good news.'

Few visitors came to my door except for passing men with their preacher pamphlets or health insurance policies.

I had use for neither. The stranger before me looked like no salesman, despite the briefcase, which he placed by his feet. He glanced at the ground, breathed in as if drawing up courage. The silver sun broke through the clouds and I saw the full force of his injuries. His expression was impossible to read, lost among the ruined flesh, but he sounded happy. 'I have long dreamt of this day. It really is extraordinary when you think of it.' He seemed almost to laugh. 'Miraculous, even . . . but also a shock.' He bowed once more, and then stood tall, arms stiff by his side. 'Please don't be alarmed. My name is Hideo Watanabe.'

Who knows how long I stood there before I realised he was asking me whether I needed to sit down. I looked again at what passed for his face. Hideo is seven years old, dressed in his school uniform, his hair brushed forward on his forehead. He holds my hand as we walk down the garden path. We spot a praying mantis on the bird table. He asks if he can keep the insect as a pet. I tell him no. We walk to school and he waves to me from the gates. That is Hideo Watanabe. That was how I chose to remember him. The man standing in front of me was an aberration. I had mourned Hideo for too many years to believe him resurrected.

'Hideo is dead. You can't be him. I'm sorry.'

'This must be hard to take in. You might need some time.'

'Please leave. I want you to go.'

The man nodded, put his hand in his suit pocket and pulled out a business card. He said he was staying at the Penn's View Hotel. His flight home was in a few days.

He offered me the card but I did not take it. He reached again into his pocket and this time produced a letter, crumpled by age or the journey undertaken. 'This will help explain why I'm here today, why it's taken me so long to find you.' I did not move and the envelope and card trembled in his grip. 'Please, you will find the contents difficult, but helpful.'

Seconds passed before I took both from him. I looked at my name printed on the top left corner of the letter. He picked up his briefcase and as he moved to go I asked, 'If you are Hideo Watanabe, you will know what we saw in the garden that last morning?'

His words when they came were as delicate as a spider's web caught by a summer breeze. 'I ask that you read the letter. That will get us started. It is good to see you, Grandmother. It really is.'

He raised that claw hand in farewell and began to walk away. I confess, when he spoke, I recognised some echo from the past. For one moment I imagined my daughter, Yuko, was talking to me in that careful staccato beat of hers, but I did not call him back to my door.