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Burnt Shadows

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Extract

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The Yet Unknowing World

Nagasaki, 9 August 1945

Later, the one who survives will remember that day as grey, but on the morning of 9 August itself both the man from Berlin, Konrad Weiss, and the schoolteacher, Hiroko Tanaka, step out of their houses and notice the perfect blueness of the sky, into which white smoke blooms from the chimneys of the munitions factories.

Konrad cannot see the chimneys themselves from his home in Minamiyamate, but for months now his thoughts have frequently wandered to the factory where Hiroko Tanaka spends her days measuring the thickness of steel with micrometers, images of classrooms swooping into her thoughts the way memories of flight might enter the minds of broken-winged birds. That morning, though, as Konrad slides open the doors that form the front and back of his small wooden caretaker's house and looks in the direction of the smoke he makes no attempt to imagine the scene unfolding wearily on the factory floor. Hiroko has a day off – a holiday, her supervisor called it, though everyone in the factory knows there is no steel left to measure. And still so many people in Nagasaki continue to think Japan will win the war. Konrad imagines conscripts sent out at night to net the clouds and release them in the morning through factory chimneys to create the illusion of industry.

He steps on to the back porch of the house. Green and brown leaves are scattered across the grass of the large property, as though the area is a battlefield in which the soldiers of warring armies have lain down, caring for nothing in death but proximity. He looks up

the slope towards Azalea Manor; in the weeks since the Kagawas departed, taking their household staff with them, everything has started to look run-down. One of the window shutters is partly ajar; when the wind picks up it takes to banging against the sill. He should secure the shutter, he knows, but it comforts him to have some sound of activity issuing from the house.

Azalea Manor. In '38 when he stepped for the first time through its sliding doors into a grand room of marble floor and Venetian fireplace it was the photographs along the wall that had captured his attention rather than the mad mixture of Japanese and European architectural styles: all taken in the grounds of Azalea Manor while some party was in progress, Europeans and Japanese mixing uncomplicatedly. He had believed the promise of the photographs and felt unaccustomedly grateful to his English brother-in-law James Burton who had told him weeks earlier that he was no longer welcome at the Burton home in Delhi with the words, 'There's a property in Nagasaki. Belonged to George – an eccentric bachelor uncle of mine who died there a few months ago. Some Jap keeps sending me telegrams asking what's to be done with it. Why don't you live there for a while? As long as you like.' Konrad knew nothing about Nagasaki – except, to its credit, that it was not Europe and it was not where James and Ilse lived – and when he sailed into the harbour of the purple-roofed city laid out like an amphitheatre he felt he was entering a world of enchantment. Seven years later much of the enchantment remains – the glassy loveliness of frost flowers in winter, seas of blue azaleas in summer, the graceful elegance of the Euro-Japanese buildings along the seafront – but war fractures every view. Or closes off the view completely. Those who go walking in the hills have been warned against looking down towards the shipyard where the battleship *Musashi* is being built under such strict secrecy that heavy curtains have been constructed to block its view from all passers-by.

Functional, Hiroko Tanaka thinks, as she stands on the porch of her house in Urakami and surveys the terraced slopes, the still morning alive with the whirring of cicadas. If there were an adjective to best describe how war has changed Nagasaki, she

decides, that would be it. Everything distilled or distorted into its most functional form. She walked past the vegetable patches on the slopes a few days ago and saw the earth itself furrowing in mystification: why potatoes where once there were azaleas? What prompted this falling-off of love? How to explain to the earth that it was more functional as a vegetable patch than a flower garden, just as factories were more functional than schools and boys were more functional as weapons than as humans.

An old man walks past with skin so brittle Hiroko thinks of a paper lantern with the figure of a man drawn on to it. She wonders how she looks to him, or to anyone. To Konrad. Just a gaunt figure in the drabbest of clothes like everyone else, she guesses, recalling with a smile Konrad's admission that when he first saw her – dressed then, as now, in white shirt and grey monpe – he had wanted to paint her. Not paint a portrait of her, he added quickly. But the striking contrast she formed with the lush green of the Kagawas' well-tended garden across which she had walked towards him ten months ago made him wish for buckets of thick, vibrant paint to pour on to her, waterfalls of colour cascading from her shoulders (rivers of blue down her shirt, pools of orange at her feet, emerald and ruby rivulets intersecting along her arms).

'I wish you had,' she said, taking his hand. 'I would have seen the craziness beneath the veneer much sooner.' He slipped his hand out of hers with a glance that mixed apology and rebuke. The military police could come upon them at any moment.

The man with the brittle skin turns to look back at her, touching his own face as if trying to locate the young man beneath the wrinkles. He has seen this neighbourhood girl – the traitor's daughter – several times in the last few months and each time it seems that the hunger they are all inhabiting conspires to make her more beautiful: the roundness of her childhood face has melted away completely to reveal the exquisiteness of sharply angled cheekbones, a mole resting just atop one of them. But somehow she escapes all traces of harshness, particularly when, as now, her mouth curves up on one side, and a tiny crease appears just millimetres from the edge of the smile, as though marking a

boundary which becomes visible only if you try to slip past it. The old man shakes his head, aware of the foolishness he is exhibiting in staring at the young woman who is entirely unaware of him, but grateful, too, for something in the world which can still prompt foolishness in him.

The metallic cries of the cicadas are upstaged by the sound of the air siren, as familiar now as the call of insects. The New Bomb! the old man thinks, and turns to hurry away to the nearest air-raid shelter, all foolishness forgotten. Hiroko, by contrast, makes a sharp sound of impatience. Already, the day is hot. In the crowded air-raid shelters of Urakami it will be unbearable – particularly under the padded air-raid hoods which she views with scepticism but has to wear if she wants to avoid lectures from the Chairman of the Neighbourhood Association about setting a poor example to the children. It is a false alarm – it is almost always a false alarm. The other cities of Japan may have suffered heavily in aerial raids, but not Nagasaki. A few weeks ago she repeated to Konrad the received wisdom that Nagasaki would be spared all serious damage because it was the most Christian of Japan's cities, and Konrad pointed out that there were more Christians in Dresden than in Nagasaki. She has started to take the air-raid sirens a little more seriously ever since. But really, it will be so hot in the shelter. Why shouldn't she just stay at home? It is almost certainly a false alarm.

Why risk it, Konrad thinks. He retrieves his air-raid hood from inside the house and starts to walk swiftly towards the shelter which the Kagawas had built in the back garden. Halfway across the garden he stops and looks at the wall which divides the property from the vacated lot next door. He hasn't checked on his birds, on the other side of the wall, since the last rain shower. Tossing the air-raid hood on the grass, he strides to the boundary wall and hoists himself over it, slinging his body low to reduce the chances of being seen by passers-by or the military police.

If anyone were to see him they would think he looked ridiculous – a gangling European tumbling over a wall, all arms and legs and hooded eyes, with hair and close-cropped beard of a colour so

unexpected in Nagasaki that Hiroko Tanaka had thought, the first time she saw him, that the hair of Europeans rusted rather than greyed as they aged. Later she discovered that he was only twenty-nine – eight years older than she was.

The dry grass crackles beneath his feet – he feels as though he is snapping the backs of tiny creatures – as he walks across to the giant camphor tree to which the birds are fastened, rotating slowly in the faint breeze. It is Hiroko who first referred to his purple notebooks as birds – the day they met; the only time she has been inside his house. She lifted a notebook off his desk, splayed, and glided it around his room. The animation of her touch made him acutely conscious of the lifelessness of his words: sentences thrown down on paper year after year simply so he could pretend there was some purpose to his being here, some excuse for cowering in a world from which he felt so separate that nothing in it could ever implicate him.

But ever since Germany's surrender shifted his status in Nagasaki from that of ally into some more ambiguous state which requires the military police to watch him closely the lifeless words have become potent enough to send him to prison. It says all there is to say about the paranoia of Imperial Japan: notebooks of research and observation about the cosmopolitan world that had briefly existed within a square mile of where he now lives are evidence of treason. Yoshi Watanabe made that clear to him when Germany's surrender started to seem imminent. *You write about a Nagasaki filled with foreigners. You write about it longingly. That's one step away from cheering on an American occupation.* And so, the night Germany surrendered, Konrad constructed a mobile of strong wire and hung each of his eight purple-leather notebooks from it. He climbed over the wall to the vacant property that adjoined his own, and attached the mobile to a tree. The wind twirled the purple-winged birds in the moonlight.

He remains certain that no one will think to enter the deserted garden to search for treachery amidst the leaves. The people who would willingly sift through every particle of dust in a house for signs of anti-state activity can always be deceived by a simple act of imagination.

Ducking beneath a low swooping branch, he reaches out a hand and finds the leather books dry and unmarked, though slightly faded. He looks gratefully up at the protective canopy of leaves before noticing the white streak on one of the leather covers: a real bird's comment on these purple impostors. His face breaks into one of those smiles which sometimes fool people into thinking him handsome. As he steps away from the tree his attention shifts to the slightly deranged tone that has crept into the mournful call of the air-raid siren. Not much point dropping a bomb here, Konrad thinks, making his way without haste back to Azalea Manor's air-raid shelter. The former Foreign Settlement where he lives is characterised now by absence, and always by waste. In Urakami ten families could live in this space! Hiroko said the first time they met, gesturing at Azalea Manor. And she followed it with: The rich! Ridiculous! before turning to ask him what he intended to pay her for the translation work he was requesting.

Weeks later, he accused her, laughingly, of driving up her price by playing on his guilt. Well, of course, she said, with characteristic frankness; scruples and starvation don't go well together. Then she spread her arms wide and scrunched her eyes shut as though concentrating hard on conjuring up another world: When the war's over, I'll be kind. Opening her eyes, she added quietly, Like my mother. He couldn't help thinking her mother would never have approved of starting up a romance with a German, or even walking alone with him through the hills of Nagasaki. It discomforted him to know his happiness was linked to the death of her mother, but then she took his hand and he doubted that anyone, even a revered mother, could have told Hiroko Tanaka what to do. Why should rules of conduct be the only things untouched by war, she once asked him? Everything from the past is passed.

Kicking the air-raid hood on the ground before him he enters the capacious shelter built into the slope of Azalea Manor's garden. The air musty and tinged with bitterness. Here, the deck of cards with which he and Yoshi Watanabe and Keiko Kagawa kept each other distracted, particularly useful during the early days of the air-

raid sirens when there was more terror than boredom associated with the warnings; here, the oak chair from which Kagawa-san surveyed the behaviour of his neighbours and family and staff during those rare occasions when the air-raid sirens found him still at home; here, the hopscotch squares which Konrad had drawn in the dust for the younger Kagawa children; here, the hidden bottle of sake which the cook thought no one else knew about; here, the other hidden bottle of sake which the teenage Kagawas came in search of late at night when the shelter was empty. They knew Konrad could see them from his caretaker's house, but while their parents might still be uneasy after seven years about quite how to negotiate their relationship with the landlord who folded his lanky frame into the tiny house at the bottom of the garden the younger Kagawas knew him as an ally and would have happily welcomed him into their drinking parties if he had shown any inclination to join them.

Now all the Kagawas cross over to the other side of the road if they see him walking towards them. One round of questioning by the military police about the suspect loyalties of their landlord was all it had taken to move them out of Azalea Manor.

Konrad sits on Kagawa-san's oak chair, bouncing his air-raid hood on his knee. He is so immersed in what was that it takes him a moment to realise that the figure which appears in the entrance to the shelter, hood in hand, exists in present tense. It is Yoshi Watanabe.

As if asking for permission to enter a private party, Yoshi says, in English, 'May I come in? I'll understand if you say no.'

Konrad doesn't respond, but as Yoshi mutters a word of apology and starts to walk away, Konrad calls out, 'Don't be an idiot, Joshua. How'd you think I'd feel if a bomb landed on you?'

Yoshi steps inside, looping his spectacles over his ears and blinking rapidly.

'I'm not sure.'

Picking up the deck of cards, he kneels on the ground, shuffling the cards and then dealing ten each to himself and the empty space across from him.

Yoshi Watanabe is the 'Jap' whose telegrams James Burton had referred to when packing Konrad off to Nagasaki. His grandfather, Peter Fuller of Shropshire, had been George Burton's closest friend and neighbour. When Konrad arrived in Nagasaki it was Yoshi who was waiting at the harbour to welcome him, Yoshi who showed him around Azalea Manor, Yoshi who found him a Japanese tutor, Yoshi who produced the Kagawas as though they were a bouquet of flowers hiding within his sleeve within hours of hearing Konrad say he'd be far more comfortable living in the cosiness of the caretaker's house, Yoshi who regaled him with stories of Nagasaki's turn-of-the-century cosmopolitan world, unique in Japan – its English-language newspapers, its International Club, its liaisons and intermarriages between European men and Japanese women. And when Konrad said he needed someone to translate Japanese letters for the book he was planning to write about the cosmopolitan world, it was Yoshi who had introduced him to his nephew's German teacher, Hiroko Tanaka.

It was one of those friendships which quickly came to seem inevitable, and unbreakable. And then in a conversation of less than a minute, it ended.

They come increasingly to check on me, Konrad. My mother's family name was Fuller. You know what that means. I can't give them any other reason to think I have divided loyalties. Until the war ends, I'm staying away from all the Westerners in Nagasaki. But only until the war ends. After, after, Konrad, things will be as before.

If you had been in Germany, Joshua, you'd say to your Jewish friends: I'm sorry I can't hide you in my attic, but come over for dinner when the Nazi government falls.

'Why are you here?'

Yoshi looks up from the fan of cards in his hand.

'I was at home when the sirens started. This is the nearest shelter.' At Konrad's raised eyebrow he adds, 'I know. I've been going to the school house's shelter these last few weeks. But with this New Bomb . . . I didn't want to risk the extra minutes out in the open.'

'So there are risks in the world greater than being associated with a German? That's comforting. What New Bomb?'

Yoshi puts down his cards.

'You haven't heard? About Hiroshima? Three days ago?'

'Three days? No one's spoken to me in three days.'

In the shelter at Urakami, Hiroko is packed in so tightly between her neighbours she cannot even raise a hand to wipe the sweat damping her hairline. It hasn't been so crowded in here since the early days of the air-raid sirens. What could have provoked the Chairman of the Neighbourhood Association into such a frenzy about rounding up everyone in his path and ordering them to the shelter? She exhales through her mouth and turns her head slightly towards the Chairman's wife, who responds by turning quickly away from Hiroko. It is impossible to know if this is guilt or disdain.

The Chairman's wife had been a close friend of Hiroko's mother – she recalls the two of them giggling together over the newest edition of *Sutairu*, in the days before war brought an end to the magazine: no place in wartime Japan for a publication that advised women on the etiquette of wearing underwear with Western dresses. As she was dying, Hiroko's mother had called the Chairman's wife to her bedside with a single request: protect my husband against himself. There was even less place in wartime Japan for an iconoclastic artist than for magazines about modern girls. For a long time, the Chairman's wife had carried out her promise, persuading her husband to regard Matsui Tanaka's outbursts against the military and the Emperor as a symbol of a husband's mourning that was so profound it had unhinged him. But in the spring, Matsui Tanaka had been walking past a neighbourhood house and saw the cherry blossom festooning it to commemorate the sacrifice of the fifteen-year-old boy who had died in a kamikaze attack. Without saying a word to Hiroko who was walking silently beside him Matsui Tanaka darted forward, pulling out a book of matches from the pocket of his trousers, and set fire to the cherry blossom.

Seconds later he lay bloodied on the ground, the dead boy's father struggling against the neighbourhood men who had finally decided to restrain him, and Hiroko, bending down over her father, found herself pulled up by the Chairman's wife.

'Report him yourself,' said the woman who had been like an aunt to her. 'That advice is the only protection I can give you now.'

She hadn't listened, of course – the privations of wartime may have loosened up her scruples, but not her loyalty – and the next day three things happened: the military police came to take her father to prison, where he stayed for over two weeks; the principal of the school where she taught German told her she was dismissed, there was no room in his school for the child of a traitor and no need for the students to learn a foreign language anyway (the principal's body curling into itself as he spoke, as though he thought that if he occupied less space there wouldn't be so much of him to despise); and when she returned home, the Chairman was waiting to tell her she had been conscripted to work at one of the munitions factories.

She wants now to signal to the Chairman's wife that she knows the woman did her best, for so long; but in part she wants to signal this in order to shame her.

Someone new enters the shelter, and everyone else is squeezed back even further, though there is nothing but polite murmurs of apology to signal the indignity of being so closely pressed up to the armpits and groins of strangers. Hiroko finds herself moving back into a gap which has opened up from necessity rather than any physical possibility, and finds herself beside two boys. Thirteen, maybe fourteen years old. She knows them, these Nagasaki boys. Not these ones exactly, but she knows that look of them. She guesses the taller one with the arrogant tilt of the head is in the habit of wooing girls or catching the attention of young teachers with tales of the thoughts he knows he'll have on his one-way flight into the bridge of a US carrier (soon, very soon, the youngest of the pilots are not much older than him), all the while implying that the female towards whom he's leaning will be central to those final, heroic thoughts.

'You're lying,' the shorter boy whispers.

The taller one shakes his head.

'Those who were close, it stripped to the bone so they were just skeletons. The ones further away, it peeled off their skin, like

grapes. And now that they have this New Bomb the Americans won't stop until we're all skeletons or grapes.'

'Stop it,' Hiroko says, in her teacher's voice. 'Stop telling these lies.'

'They're not . . .' the boy starts to say, but her raised eyebrow silences him.

One of her former students – Joseph – really had piloted his Ohka into a US carrier. He told her once that on the final flight he would take with him two pictures – one of his parents standing beneath a cherry tree, and one of Myrna Loy. A picture of Myrna Loy, she said, as you destroy a US warship? But he couldn't see any irony in that. He was the neighbourhood boy whose death had propelled her father into burning the cherry blossom – perhaps he did it for her. The only way he knew of saying he understood her grief and fury, held inarticulate inside. She doesn't know which she is more surprised by – the possibility that this could be true, or the fact that it hasn't occurred to her earlier. Since her mother's death she has taken to interpreting the silence from her father as an absence of anything worth communicating rather than an inability to form a new configuration with his daughter now his beloved wife is no longer around to serve as the voice to his thoughts.

'Skeleton or grape?' the tall boy whispers. She can smell the fetidness of stale breath.

Outside are air and trees and mountains. It's worth any risk.

She shoulders her way forward, and all those who were polite in allowing more people in are outraged by her attempts to leave.

'What are you doing . . . there's no room . . . keep back, keep back . . .' An elbow collides with her ribs.

'My father,' she calls out. 'I must find my father.'

Some of the women in the shelter start to make room for her to exit, lifting their children up in their arms.

A voice says, 'Her father is Matsui Tanaka, the traitor,' and there's a ripple of unpleasantness around the shelter, more people making space for her but in a way that suggests they don't want her here.

She doesn't care. She is out now, gulping in the fresh air which almost seems cool by comparison.

She walks quickly to get away from the shelter, and then slows, aware of the emptiness around her. Under a pale-leafed tree she holds her arms up to be patterned with drifting spots of sun and shadow as the branches sway in a breeze that isn't perceptible at ground-level. She glimpses her hands as she holds them up – blistered from the combination of factory work and bamboo-spear drills. This was not how she imagined twenty-one. Instead, she imagined Tokyo – Hiroko Tanaka in the big city, wearing dresses, leaving lipstick marks on wine glasses in jazz clubs, her hair cut just below the ear – single-handedly resurrecting the lifestyle of the 'modern girl' of the twenties whose spirit had lived on in *Sutairu* through the thirties.

But that was childish dreaming. Or borrowed dreaming, really. She saw the way her mother sighed and laughed over stories of the modern girls and she imagined their world as the only mode of escape from a dutiful life. Though the older she got the more she was certain her mother – so devoted to husband and daughter and home – never really desired the escape, only enjoyed the idea that it existed in the world. That was where she and her daughter so sharply differed. For Hiroko, to know was to want. But that world glimpsed in magazines was known far less than the world she could reach out and grasp by the roots of its rust-coloured hair.

Now the childhood dreams are past. Now there is Konrad. As soon as the war ends, there will be her and Konrad. As soon as the war ends, there will be food and silk. She'll never wear grey again, never re-use tea leaves again, never lift a bamboo spear, or enter a factory or bomb shelter. As soon as the war ends there will be a ship to take her and Konrad far away into a world without duty.

When will the war end? It cannot happen quickly enough.

He walks away from Azalea Manor, almost running.

He can hear Yoshi calling him to come back and wait for the all-clear, but all he can think is that if another New Bomb is to fall it will fall on Urakami: on the factories, on the people packed close together. The shelters won't keep it out, not the thing Yoshi described. And if it is to fall on Hiroko, let it fall on him, too.

He picks up his pace, runs through memories of her: the gate through which she walked in search of him as soon as Yoshi's nephew delivered the letter he had written, asking if she'd be interested in translating letters and diaries into German for a negotiable fee; the schoolyard where they used to meet every week for the first few months, the exchange of translations and money slipping further and further to the margins of their encounters; the road leading to the street-car, where she'd responded to his gloomy complaints about rationing by singing 'Yes, We Have No Bananas' and he discovered she spoke English as fluently as German; the Chinese quarter, where he made her laugh out loud for the first time, confessing the names he'd given to all the vegetables he didn't recognise: windswept cabbage, knots of earth, fossilised flower, lanky potato; Megane-Bashi, or Spectacles Bridge, where they had been standing, looking into the water, when a small silver fish leapt out of Konrad's reflected chest and dived into her reflection and she said, 'Oh,' and stepped back, almost losing her balance, so he had to put his arm around her waist to steady her. And here – he slows; the all-clear sounds; the threat has passed – the banks of the Oura, where he told her that his first winter in Nagasaki he had walked past the frozen river and seen splashes of colour beneath the surface.

'I went closer to look. And what do you think I saw? A woman's name. Hana. It had been written in red ink by someone – either a skilled artist or an obsessed lover – who knew how to paint on the water in the instant before the ice froze the characters into place.'

Instead of a shaking her head at him and offering up some entirely practical explanation for a name sealed in ice, as he had expected, she frowned.

'Your first winter here was '38. Why didn't we meet sooner? What a waste.'

It was the first indication he had that she – bizarrely, wonderfully – went at least part-way to reciprocating his feelings.

He sets off again, panic replaced by purposefulness. Ever since Germany's surrender he has told her it isn't safe for her – a traitor's daughter – to spend too much time with him. So they have been meeting only twice a week, for an hour at a time,

always out in public, sometimes trailed by the military police – on those occasions they speak loudly, in Japanese, about the glorious history of Japan about which she pretends to instruct him. He has stopped his weekly practice of lending her books in German and English from his library, though it has formerly been one of his great pleasures to see the different expressions of delight with which she greets Yeats, Waugh, Mann; no matter the length or denseness she is done with the book – has sometimes read it twice – by the time the next week comes around. But now 'books' have joined the list of suspended intimacies between them. Each time they meet she complains that there's too much rationing in the world as it is, but he is unyielding. After the war, he always says. After the war. Now he sees how much of Yoshi's thinking has infected him.

Crossing into the valley, he looks up towards Urakami Cathedral with its stone figures that stand against the sky – on overcast days their greyness suggests each cloud is an incipient statue waiting for a sculptor to pull it down and hew it into solidity. And he, too, has been hewn into solidity – gone now those days of insubstantiality, not knowing what he's doing in Japan, a fugitive from a once-beloved country he long ago gave up on trying to fight for or against. He knows entirely why he's here, why here is the only place he can be.

Away from the river now, away from the Cathedral, he veers towards the slope she has described to him – with the denuded silver-barked tree painted black so that the moonlight doesn't make a steel tower of it and draw enemy fire (and on the topmost branches someone has painted stars). There, the purple rooftops of her neighbourhood which remind her of his notebooks, so every day when she comes home from the factory she sees his birds, every night she falls asleep beneath their outstretched wings.

'Konrad-san?' She stands on the verandah of her house, looking at him with concern. What could have brought him to Urakami, for all her neighbours to see?

He smiles and makes a gesture of mock-despair. Months ago he asked her to call him 'Konrad' and she said, 'It's a nice name, but on

its own it sounds naked.' Then she gave him her wickedest smile. 'One day, maybe that won't be a problem.'

'Is your father here?'

'Out walking in the hills. Come.'

She opens the sliding door and he fumbles to take off his shoes before joining her inside. She is walking up the stairs before he's in and he barely allows himself time to look around the small reception room, the focal point of which is an ink-and-brush painting of a Nagasaki seascape – her father's work, he guesses correctly, feeling strangely unsettled at the thought of her father. Hiroko once said she learnt how to question the world's rules from his example rather than his instruction, and Konrad can't help but suspect Matsui Tanaka's disengaged parenting will stop at the precise moment his daughter introduces him to the German she . . . what? . . . loves?

Upstairs, he enters a room in which a futon is rolled up, but hasn't yet been put away. He tries not to stare at her bedding.

Hiroko steps out on to the balcony and leans on the railing. This house is far up the slope and though it is hemmed in on three sides by other homes the balcony looks out on to nothing but trees and hills. And nothing but trees and hills look on to it.

'You never told me you live a single dive away from an ocean of liquid leaves,' he says.

She touches his sleeve.

'Are you all right? You look strange. And you're here. Why?'

As ever their conversation moves between German, English and Japanese. It feels to them like a secret language which no one else they know can fully decipher.

'I have to ask you something. I don't want to wait until the war ends to hear the answer.' In saying it he realises his purpose in coming here. 'Will you marry me?'

Her response is swift. She pulls herself to her full height, hands on her hips.

'How dare you?'

He steps back. How has he been so completely wrong?

'How dare you suggest there's a question attached to it? Last week when we talked about travelling around the world together

after the war – in what capacity did you think I was agreeing to go with you, if not as your wife?' The end of the sentence is muffled in his shirt as he pulls her to him.

Peace, she thinks. This is what peace feels like.

'Not Delhi,' he says.

They sit on the balcony, fingers tangling.

'But I want to meet Ilse. She's your sister; I have to meet her.'

'Half-sister,' he corrects. 'And it's been a long time since she was Ilse Weiss. Now it's just Elizabeth Burton. And you will meet her – just not on our honeymoon. Frankly the only person worth meeting at Bungle Oh! is Sajjad – if he's still there. Lovely Muslim boy who works for James. He's the one who told me that story of the spider in Islam, remember?'

She moves her head away from his shoulder.

'Bungalow?'

'Bungle Oh! It's a pun. Bungle Oh!, Civil Lines, Delhi. Maybe you're right – we should go. Who could resist an address like that?'

'You're not being serious,' she grumbles.

'That's a new complaint.' He kisses her head. 'Ilse won't want us there. I've told you how ashamed she is of what she refers to as her "German connections". That's what my father and I are reduced to. Connections. And that was before the war. Now, who even knows if she'll acknowledge she knows me? She probably tells everyone she sprang fully formed from her mother's Anglo-Saxon forehead.'

'OK,' she says. 'No Delhi. What about New York?'

He wonders if she's heard anything about this New Bomb. The thought of it makes him pull her even closer.

She decides not to point out that, despite the cloud cover, it's far too hot for such bodily contact. Her mind leaps ahead to the further kinds of bodily contact which will be made necessary by marriage. She wonders if his knowledge of what happens on wedding nights is less vague than hers. Her curiosity about this is entirely abstract.

'Your father will be back from his walk soon,' Konrad says. Regretfully he stands up, pulling her along with him. 'This is not how I want him to see his future son-in-law for the first time.'

'Come back for dinner then. I'll give you all you can eat of Urakami's best miso-flavoured water.'

'Sounds perfect.'

He's looking at her now in a way that makes her put her hand up to her mouth to brush off whatever he sees clinging there. He laughs softly, puts his arms around her waist and kisses her.

He has kissed her before, of course. Many times. But always in a hurried manner, quickly quickly before anyone sees. Now he is different. She feels something moist. It's his tongue. That should feel repellent, but it doesn't. Anything but. She is amazed by what her body seems to know to do in response, how this can feel both strange and yet familiar.

When he pulls away she says, 'Stay,' and leans back into him.

He shakes his head at her in a way that doesn't mean no, only not yet.

'Stay.'

But he steps back. He suspects she does not fully understand what is promised in that demand, what is already just a single breath away from being inevitable.

'I'll be back for dinner.' He steps backwards, his eyes never leaving her face.

In this manner he walks down the stairs, and she can't help laughing. He looks as if he's in a movie reel that has accidentally reversed itself.

'Where are you going?'

'I don't know . . . Urakami Cathedral!'

'Oh. Is that where we're going to get married?' Displeasure in her voice.

'Of course not. You're not even Catholic.'

'That's not the problem. I want to get married on a mountain, looking down at the sea.'

'I'll only be looking at you.' His grin manages to make the statement sexual rather than sentimental.

This side of him really is entirely new, and she is surprised by her own sense of anticipation even as she swats the air as though to dispatch his absurd comment.

He has reversed himself all the way to the verandah now.

'So why are you going to the Cathedral?'

'Father Asano said he'd lend me some books. I don't want the books, but since he's one of the few people still willing to associate with me I don't want to offend him.'

'We'll leave them all behind, Konrad. We'll find an island where only the two of us have to live.'

It is the first time she has said his name without the honorific. He steps forward, presses his mouth against hers again – uncaring that the neighbours might see.

When he is gone, Hiroko races up to the stairs to see if she can watch him from the window as he descends the slope, but the angles of her house don't allow it. She is suddenly, shockingly, aware of her own body. Such a mixture of heaviness and lightness – her limbs suffused with pleasure, exhausted by it, and yet it feels as though there are wings attached to her, on the verge of lifting her off the ground entirely.

In the corner of the room is a trunk in which her father keeps the most precious memories of his wife. She opens the trunk and reaches for the silk kimono which is folded beneath a seashell and an envelope filled with letters.

Hiroko removes the kimono from the trunk, and throws it up in the air. The silk shifts against itself and unfolds, so that what went up a square comes down a rectangle; again she throws it up, and it hits the ceiling lamp, catching on its shade before slithering down into her waiting arms. She closes her arms around the fabric that suggests being draped in a waterfall and thinks of holding Konrad, naked.

She undresses quickly, removing the hated grey monpe and the shirt that was once a gleaming white and is now just the colour of too many washes. Then she continues, removing every scrap of clothing. Something strange is happening inside her body which she doesn't understand, but she knows she wants it to go on happening. Without care for underclothes, she slips one arm into the sleeve of the kimono, the silk electric against her skin.

Konrad walks across Urakami Valley, his heart folding in and in on itself.

Hiroko steps out on to the verandah. Her body from neck down a silk column, white with three black cranes swooping across her back. She looks out towards the mountains, and everything is more beautiful to her than it was early this morning. Nagasaki is more beautiful to her than ever before. She turns her head and sees the spires of Urakami Cathedral, which Konrad is looking up at when he notices a gap open between the clouds. Sunlight streams through, pushing the clouds apart even further.

Hiroko.

And then the world goes white.