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Satori

Written by Don Winslow

A novel based on Trevanian's Shibumi

Published by Headline

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Satori

DON WINSLOW

A Novel Based On
TREVANIAN'S *SHIBUMI*

headline

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1

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Part One

TOKYO, OCTOBER 1951

1

Nicholai Hel watched the maple leaf drop from the branch, flutter in the slight breeze, then fall gently to the ground.

It was beautiful.

Savoring the first glimpse of nature that he'd had after three years of solitary confinement in an American prison cell, he breathed in the crisp autumn air, let it fill his lungs, and held it for a few moments before he exhaled.

Haverford mistook it for a sigh.

'Glad to be out?' the agent asked.

Nicholai didn't respond. The American was as nothing to him, a mere merchant like the rest of his compatriots, peddling espionage instead of automobiles, shaving cream, or Coca-Cola. Nicholai had no intention of engaging in meaningless conversation, never mind allowing this functionary access to his personal thoughts.

Of course he was glad to be out, he thought as he looked back at the bleak gray walls of Sugamo Prison, but why did Westerners feel a need to voice the obvious, or attempt to give expression to the ineffable? It was the nature of a maple leaf to drop in the autumn. I killed General Kishikawa, as close to a father as I ever had, because it was my filial nature – and duty – to do so. The Americans

imprisoned me for it because they could do nothing else, given their nature.

And now they offer me my 'freedom' because they need me.

Nicholai resumed his walk along the pebbled path flanked by the maple trees. A bit surprised that he felt a twinge of anxiety at being outside the closed, small space of his cell, he fought off the wave of dizziness brought on by the open sky. This world was large and empty; he had no one left in it except himself. His own adequate company for three years, he was reentering a world that he no longer knew at the age of twenty-six.

Haverford had anticipated this, having consulted a psychologist on the issues that face prisoners going back into society. The classic Freudian, replete with the stereotypical Viennese accent, had advised Haverford that 'the subject' would have become used to the limitations of his confinement and feel overwhelmed at first by the sheer space suddenly confronting him in the outside world. It would be prudent, the doctor warned, to transfer the man to a small, windowless room with voluntary access to a yard or garden so that he could gradually acclimate himself. Open spaces, or a crowded city with its bustling population and incessant noise, would be likely to upset the subject.

So Haverford had arranged for a small room in a quiet safe house in the Tokyo suburbs. But from what he could learn from what there *was* to be learned of Nicholai Hel, he couldn't imagine the man being easily overwhelmed or upset. Hel displayed preternatural self-possession, a calm that was almost condescending, confidence that often crossed the line into arrogance. On the surface, Hel appeared to be

a perfect blend of his aristocratic Russian mother and his samurai surrogate father, the war criminal Kishikawa, whom he had saved from the shame of a hangman's noose with a single finger-thrust to the trachea.

Despite his blond hair and vibrant green eyes, Haverford thought, Hel is more Asian than Western. He even walks like an Asian – his arms crossed behind his back so as to take up as little space as possible and not cause inconvenience to anyone coming from the other direction, his tall, thin frame slightly stooped in modesty. European in appearance, Haverford decided, Asian in substance. Well, it made sense – he was raised by his émigré mother in Shanghai, and then mentored by Kishikawa when the Japs took the city. After the mother died, Kishikawa moved the boy to Japan to live with and study under a master of the impossibly complicated and nuanced board game Go, a sort of Jap chess, albeit a hundredfold more difficult.

Hel became a master in his own right.

So is it any wonder that Hel thinks like an Asian?

Nicholai sensed the man's thoughts on him. The Americans are incredibly transparent, their thoughts as obvious as stones at the bottom of a clear, still pool. He didn't care what Haverford thought of him – one doesn't solicit the opinions of a grocery clerk – but it did annoy him. Shifting his attention to the sun on his face, he felt it warm his skin.

'What would you like?' Haverford asked.

'In the sense of what?'

Haverford chuckled. Most men emerging from long confinement wanted three things – a drink, a meal, and a woman, not necessarily in that order. But he was not going

to indulge Hel's arrogance, so he answered, in Japanese, 'In the sense of what would you like?'

Mildly impressed that Haverford spoke Japanese, and interested that he refused to surrender such a small stone on the board, Nicholai responded, 'I don't suppose that you could organize an acceptable cup of tea.'

'In fact,' Haverford said, 'I've arranged a modest *cha-kai*. I hope you find it acceptable.'

A formal tea ceremony, Nicholai thought.

How interesting.

A car waited at the end of the walk. Haverford opened the back door and ushered Nicholai in.

2

THE *CHA-KAI* WAS not only acceptable, it was sublime.

Nicholai savored each sip of the *cha-noyu* as he sat cross-legged on the tatami floor next to the lacquered table. The tea was transcendent, as was the geisha who knelt nearby, discreetly just out of hearing range of the sparse conversation.

To Nicholai's shock, the functionary Haverford knew his way around the tea ceremony and served with impeccable courtesy, his ritual flawless. Upon arrival at the teahouse, Haverford had apologized that there were, by necessity, no other guests, then led Nicholai into the *machiai*, the waiting room, where he introduced Nicholai to an exquisitely lovely geisha.

'This is Kamiko-san,' Haverford said. 'She will serve as my *hanto* today.'

Kamiko bowed and handed Nicholai a kimono to put on, then offered him *sayu*, a cup of the same hot water that would be used to brew the tea. Nicholai took a sip, then, as Haverford excused himself to go prepare the tea, Kamiko took Nicholai outside to the *roji*, the 'dew ground,' a small garden that held only arrangements of rocks but no flowers. They sat on the stone bench and, without conversation, enjoyed the tranquility.

A few minutes later Haverford, now kimono-clad, walked to a stone basin and ceremonially washed his mouth and hands in the fresh water, then stepped through the middle gate into the *roji*, where he formally welcomed Nicholai with a bow. In turn, Nicholai purified himself at the *tsukubai*.

To enter the *cha-shitsu*, the tearoom, they had to pass through a sliding door that was only three feet high, forcing them to bow, an act that symbolized the divide between the physical world and the spiritual realm of the tearoom.

The *cha-shitsu* was exquisite, elegant in its simplicity, a perfect expression of *shibumi*. As tradition demanded, they first walked to an alcove, on the wall of which hung the *kakemono*, a scroll with painted calligraphy appropriate to the day's occasion. In his role as guest, Nicholai admired the skillful brushwork, which depicted the Japanese symbol for *satori*.

An interesting choice, Nicholai thought. *Satori* was the Zen Buddhist concept of a sudden awakening, a realization of life as it really is. It came not as a result of meditation or conscious thought, but could arrive in the wisp of a breeze, the crackle of a flame, the falling of a leaf.

Nicholai had never known *satori.*

In front of the *kakemono*, on a small wooden stand, was a bowl that held a single small maple branch.

They stepped over to a low table, on which was a charcoal burner and a kettle. As Nicholai and Kamiko knelt on the mat by the table, Haverford bowed and left the room. A few moments later a gong sounded, and he returned carrying the *cha-wan*, a red ceramic bowl that contained a tea whisk, a tea scoop, and a cloth.

As *teishu*, the host, Haverford knelt at his proper place at the table, directly across the hearth from Nicholai. He wiped all the utensils with the cloth, then filled the bowl with hot water, rinsed the whisk, then poured the water into a waste bowl and carefully wiped the tea bowl again.

Nicholai found himself enjoying the old ritual, but did not want to be lulled into complacency. The American had obviously done his research and knew that in the few years of freedom Nicholai had enjoyed in Tokyo before his imprisonment, he had established a formal Japanese household, with retainers, and had observed the old rituals. Surely he knew that Nicholai would find the *cha-kai* both nostalgic and comforting.

And it is both, Nicholai thought, but be cautious.

Haverford presented the tea scoop, then opened a small container and paused to allow his guest to appreciate the aroma. Nicholai realized with surprise that this was *koi-cha*, from plants one hundred years old, grown only in the shade in certain parts of Kyoto. He could not imagine what this *mat-cha* might have cost, then wondered what it might eventually cost him, given that the Americans had not gone to such extravagance for nothing.

Pausing for precisely the correct time, Haverford then dipped a small ladle into the container and scooped out six measures of the finely powdered pale green tea into the *cha-wan*. He used the bamboo ladle to heap hot water into the bowl, then took the whisk and whipped the potion into a thin paste. He examined his work, then, satisfied, passed the bowl across the table to Nicholai.

As ritual demanded, Nicholai bowed, took the *cha-wan* with his right hand, then passed it to his left, holding it only

in the palm of his hand. He turned it clockwise three times and then took a long sip. The tea was superb, and Nicholai politely finished his drink with a loud slurp. Then he wiped the rim of the *cha-wan* with his right hand, turned it once clockwise, and handed it back to Haverford, who bowed and took a drink.

Now the *cha-kai* entered a less formal phase, as Haverford wiped the *cha-wan* again and Kamiko added more charcoal to the hearth in preparation for making cups of thinner tea. Still, there were formalities to observe, and Nicholai in his role as guest began a conversation about the utensils used in the ceremony.

'The *cha-wan* is Momoyama Period, yes?' he said to Haverford, recognizing the distinct red tincture. 'It is beautiful.'

'Momoyama, yes,' Haverford answered, 'but not the best example.'

They both knew that the seventeenth-century bowl was rightfully priceless. The American had gone to immense trouble and expense to arrange this 'modest' *cha-kai*, and Nicholai could not help but wonder why.

And the American could not quite contain his satisfaction at pulling off this surprise.

I don't know you, Hel, Haverford thought as he sank back into his own *seiza* position, but you don't know me either.

In fact, Ellis Haverford was something quite different from the Company thugs who had beaten Nicholai to a bloody pulp during three days of brutal interrogation. A native of Manhattan's Upper East Side, he had spurned Yale and Harvard for Columbia, as he couldn't imagine anyone

choosing to live anywhere but on the isle of Manhattan. He was majoring in Oriental history and languages when Pearl Harbor was bombed, and was therefore a natural to go into an intelligence desk job.

Haverford refused, joined the Marines instead, and commanded a platoon on Guadalcanal and a company in New Guinea. Purple Heart and Navy Cross on his chest, he finally conceded that his education was being wasted, agreed to go into the covert side of the war, and found himself training local resistance movements against the Japanese in the jungles of French Indochina. Haverford was fluent in French, Japanese, and Vietnamese and could make himself understood in some parts of China. As aristocratic in his own way as Hel – although he came from far more money – Ellis Haverford was one of those rare individuals who seemed comfortable in any setting, including an exclusive Japanese teahouse.

Now Kamiko served thin tea and brought out *mukozuke*, a tray of light snacks – sashimi and pickled vegetables.

'The food is good,' Nicholai said in Japanese as Kamiko served.

'It's garbage,' Haverford answered, pro forma, 'but I'm afraid it's the best I can offer. I am so sorry.'

'It's more than enough,' Nicholai said, unconsciously slipping into Japanese manners that he had not had the opportunity to use for years.

'You are more than kind,' Haverford responded.

Aware of Kamiko's passive attention, Nicholai asked, 'Shall we switch languages?'

Haverford already knew that Hel spoke English, French, Russian, German, Chinese, Japanese, and, randomly, Basque

– so there was quite a menu from which to choose. He suggested French and Nicholai accepted.

'So,' Nicholai said, 'you have offered me one hundred thousand dollars, my liberty, a Costa Rican passport, and the home addresses of Major Diamond and his apprentices in exchange for my performing a service that I assume involves a murder.'

'"Murder" is an ugly word,' Haverford answered, 'but you have the basic elements of the deal correct, yes.'

'Why me?'

'You have certain unique characteristics,' Haverford said, 'combined with specific skills required for the assignment.'

'Such as?'

'You don't need to know that yet.'

'When do I begin?' Nicholai asked.

'More a question of *how*.'

'Very well. *How* do I begin?'

'First,' Haverford answered, 'we repair your face.'

'You find it unpalatable?' Nicholai asked, aware that his once handsome countenance was indeed a lopsided, swollen and disjointed mess from the fists and truncheons of Major Diamond and his associates.

Nicholai had worked for the Americans as a translator until he had killed Kishikawa-san; then Diamond and his goons had beaten Nicholai before subjecting him to mind-altering, horrifying experiments with psychotropic drugs. The pain had been bad enough, the disfigurement still worse, but what hurt Nicholai even more was the loss of control, the terrible helplessness, the feeling that Diamond and his disgusting little helpers had somehow stolen his very being

and played with it the way a twisted and stupid child might have toyed with a captive animal.

I will deal with them in due time, he thought. Diamond, his thugs, the doctor who administered the injections and observed the results on his 'patient' with cold-blooded clinical interest – they will all see me again, albeit briefly, and just before they die.

Right now I must come to terms with Haverford, who is essential to achieving my revenge. At least Haverford is interesting – impeccably dressed, obviously well educated, just as obviously a scion of what passes for the aristocracy in America.

'Not at all,' Haverford said. 'I just believe that when you damage something, you should repair it. It seems only fair.'

Haverford is trying to tell me, Nicholai thought, in a quite un-American subtle way, that *he* is not *them*. But of course you *are*, the clothes and education are but a patina on the same cracked vessel. He asked, 'What if I do not choose to be "repaired"?'

'Then I am afraid we would have to cancel our arrangement,' Haverford said pleasantly, glad that the French softened what would be a harsh ultimatum in English. 'Your current appearance would prompt questions, the answers to which don't match the cover we've taken a lot of trouble creating for you.'

'"Cover"?'

'A new identity,' Haverford answered, reminded that while Hel was an efficient killer he was nevertheless a neophyte in the larger world of espionage, 'replete with a fictitious personal history.'

'Which is what?' Nicholai asked.

Haverford shook his head. 'You don't need to know yet.'

Deciding to test the board, Nicholai said, 'I was quite content in my cell. I could go back.'

'You could,' Haverford agreed. 'And we could decide to bring you to trial for the murder of Kishikawa.'

Well played, Nicholai thought, deciding that he needed to be more cautious when dealing with Haverford. Seeing that there was no route of attack there, he retreated like a slowly ebbing tide. 'The surgery on my face – I assume we are discussing surgery . . .'

'Yes.'

'I also assume it will be painful.'

'Very.'

'The recuperation period?'

'Several weeks,' Haverford answered. He refilled Nicholai's cup, then his own, and nodded to Kamiko to bring a fresh pot. 'They won't be wasted, however. You have a lot of work to do.'

Nicholai raised an eyebrow.

'Your French,' Haverford said. 'Your vocabulary is impressive, but your accent is all wrong.'

'My French nanny would be greatly offended.'

Haverford switched to Japanese, a better language than French to express polite regret. '*Gomen nosei*, but your new dialect needs to be more southern.'

Why would that be? Nicholai wondered. He didn't ask, however, not wanting to appear too curious or, for that matter, interested.

Kamiko waited at their periphery, then, hearing him finish, bowed and served the tea. She was beautifully coiffed, with alabaster skin and sparkling eyes, and Nicholai was

annoyed when Haverford noticed him looking and said, 'It has already been arranged, Hel-san.'

'Thank you, no,' Nicholai said, unwilling to give the American the satisfaction of correctly perceiving his physical need. It would show weakness, and give Haverford a victory.

'Really?' Haverford asked. 'Are you sure?'

Or else I would not have spoken, Nicholai thought. He didn't answer the question, but instead said, 'One more thing.'

'Yes?'

'I will not kill an innocent person.'

Haverford chuckled. 'Small chance of that.'

'Then I accept.'

Haverford bowed.