

Chapter One

Mas Arai was worried that the customs officer at Kansai Airport would find his best friend, Haruo Mukai, inside his suitcase. Mas had wrapped him in an old plastic bag, tied the top with green gardening twine, and stuffed the package in one of his worn socks. If Mas's wife, Genessee, had not been in a convalescent home, recovering from knee surgery, everything would have transpired so differently. For one, he would have had a proper suitcase, not one with a broken roller wheel. And two, she would have consulted the authorities with the airlines to discover the proper way to transport ashes of a dead man. But all that was *mendokusai* for Mas. A hassle. An inconvenience. If you need to get from point A to point B, you just draw a straight line, he thought. Talking always wasted time.

He had been remarried for six years. Remarkable for an old retired gardener who was now pushing eighty-six. Love had sucker punched him, blinded him when he wasn't looking or expecting it. His marriage to his first wife, Chizuko,

made much more sense. He was a thirtysomething bachelor in Los Angeles and it was time. His family in Hiroshima suggested that he return to Japan to get a wife, which he did. That was the last time he'd stepped foot in Japan. That is, until now.

Back then there had been no airport here in Kansai, about 250 miles from the area where he'd spent his youth. He was no expert on airplanes or airports, but this one looked similar to LAX, at least behind the scenes. Sure, here the officers were all Japanese men and women, some wearing white masks to prevent the spread of their sick germs, but they had the same steely stare. Looks that could strip him down in an instant. Whether it was in the US or Japan, uniformed officers knew that he didn't quite belong.

The man in front of him had a big black mole on one cheek. Mas wondered if the officer had had it as a child and whether it was always the same size or had grown as he aged. If it was the former, he must have endured much bullying.

"Are you American?" the officer asked in English, as if the blue passport cover was a fraud.

"Yes," Mas answered back in Japanese.

The officer's gaze remained on Mas. Mas, on the other hand, could not take his eyes off the giant mole.

"Fine." The man gestured that he could proceed.

He had made it through.



Mas had heard that Kansai Airport had been built on

a man-made island. Just the thought of that made him feel a bit queasy, as if he couldn't depend on the integrity of the land.

In terms of land transportation, he attempted to read the instructions from Genessee, who had looked up all the information on her cell phone from her hospital bed and had even written it down. The only problem was that he could barely read her handwriting, which was loopy and imprecise. Chizuko's, on the other hand, had been picture perfect from a missionary's instruction in Hiroshima. She brought that perfection with her to America.

His and Chizuko's only child, Mari, had also tried to help by showing him train and bus schedules and sightseeing stops on her laptop. Of course, he had retained nothing and had even forgotten her printouts on his kitchen table. This trip was not about seeing the sights anyway. It was about wham, bam, getting things done. All he knew was that he was to meet someone at Hiroshima Station later that afternoon.

Seeing the blue sky through the wall of windows, Mas instinctively headed outside. The minute he left the artificially cooled airport, he was hit with a wall of heat. He had noted on an airport clock earlier that it was eight o'clock in the morning in Japan, and the humidity pressed down on his face, entering his ear canals, nostrils, and throat. The tail end of July, he'd heard, was the absolute worst time to travel in Japan, and, of course, Haruo had to die in the summer. Even in his death, Haruo wasn't doing Mas any favors. And Mas knew that if he waited until fall, he himself might not

be alive, not to mention Haruo's older sister, the recipient of the ashes.

There were some buses lined up in a row and he figured he would head south. The bus driver attempted to take the broken suitcase and place it in the bottom storage unit, but Mas didn't want to be separated from it. He wrestled it away and took it into the bus. It careened into the knees of irritated passengers as it bounced behind him through the narrow middle aisle. He finally found an open spot and stuffed it into an overhead shelf.

He swore as he settled in his seat. And to the suitcase above, he said silently, *Haruo, see. Youzu make me come all the way ova here.*

This trip was the most *mendokusai* thing that he had ever done in his life, other than perhaps flying to pick up Chizuko from Hiroshima. Somewhere in his garage was a remnant of that inconvenient trip, a Pan Am flight bag covered with decades of dust, sticky grime, and even droppings from a mouse that had certainly lost its way.



"Excuse me, excuse," someone was speaking to him in Japanese.

Mas blinked hard and tried to remember where he was. The bus felt different. It was plusher than the hard seats of the Metro back in Los Angeles. The driver had taken down his suitcase and placed it in the aisle. *Why couldn't he keep his hands off of my private property?*

He almost stumbled down the stairs to the curb and gazed up to see a white, modern building that resembled a giant humidifier. “Where are you going?” the driver asked him. Mas took out his wife’s illegible notes, and the driver directed him inside. The suitcase bumping sideways behind him, he made his way down the platform and into the modest station. There was a wall of ticket machines with grids of some cities that he hadn’t heard of. What had happened during the more than fifty years that he had been away?

Passersby ignored him, probably assuming that he knew where he was going. He looked a hundred percent Japanese, after all. He finally approached a window next to the rows of ticket gates. A young man in a black railway hat and blue uniform appeared in the window, holding some kind of metal tool in his right hand.

“Ah, I’m going to Hiroshima,” Mas managed to say in Japanese.

“You can get your ticket from the machines there. Or go to the Green Window.”

Green Window? What the hell was a Green Window?

Just then a group of five teenagers pressed behind him, holding up some kind of pass in their wallets. He stepped aside with his broken suitcase, feeling more lost than he ever did in America. Even though there were rules in the US, there always seem to be rule breakers. People looked different and acted differently from each other. Here, people seemed to be programmed similarly. Sure there was the random Japanese bohemian with dreadlocks carrying a surfboard, but he moved in concert with the flow of Japan.

Mas, on the other hand, was a knot in the middle of the smooth silk string, the scratch on the vinyl record. Even though he had lived in Japan from age three to eighteen, his birthplace, America, where he spent the past almost seventy years, had made him a stranger here.

He wandered in a circle, hoping to seize upon anything that could direct him to where he needed to go. And then he saw it. A sign with the Japanese writing, *Midori no Madoguchi*. Literally Green Window. And then an arrow.

It turned out there were no green windows in this ticket office, just a green image of a stick figure sitting back in a reclined seat. But there were workers—again not wearing anything green—who seemed to be solving problems and issuing tickets to a line of people. Waiting in the line was a *hakujin*, a white man with unruly hair, a smelly backpack at his side. This could have been his own son-in-law, Lloyd, maybe twenty-five years ago. If the Green Window people could help the backpacker, they could surely help him.

Once he finally reached the counter, the clerk didn't bother to look at his face and seemed unfazed by his rough-and-tumble Japanese. She obviously had dealt with a wide range of *gaijin* travelers and had no expectations of him. For a few glorious minutes, Mas felt free to be himself—an ignorant outsider who was not being judged. Then an envelope with the ticket was placed in his hand, and he was released to the wilds beyond the Green Window.



Even trying to find the correct place to stand on the platform was a challenge. There seemed to be random numbers and he couldn't quite find where he needed to be. He felt embarrassed to approach the *hakujin* backpacker, but it would be worse to bother the slick salarymen and polished office ladies who were focused on their newspapers or cell phones.

"Ah, I stand here?" He asked lifting his ticket to the man's eye level.

The backpacker seemed flattered to be approached by an old Japanese man. "This is for assigned seats," he replied in an accent that wasn't American. "You should stand there." He pointed to a row on one end of the platform.

Truth be told, Mas was curious about riding in a bullet train. High-speed rail had come after he and Chizuko had gotten married. Would it indeed shoot forward as fast as a projectile from a gun? Although he was not one to get carsick, he braced himself for a new experience. First a fake island and now a train traveling two hundred miles per hour.

Just then the train arrived, its front shaped like a dolphin's nose. Everything about the bullet train was sleek and silent. Mas stepped forward, almost bumping into the old woman standing in front of him, but no one moved. A line of women in pink uniforms rushed in with rag bags and turned the seats around, wiping them down and replacing doilies on the headrests with new ones.

He was transfixed with how the cleaners worked with such purpose. In a few minutes they were finished and appeared at the entrance of the trains with smiles on their

faces. The train was now ready for its passengers to make their way down the spine of the archipelago.

The train was not crowded, and he opted for a window seat. Again, he pushed the suitcase with Haruo's ashes up into an overhead shelf. Luckily, it was low, not like the high shelves in America.

Sitting down, he glanced at his Casio watch, which was nowhere close to the correct time in Japan. Most people, he noticed, had already ordered a lunch box before entering the bullet train. They placed their elegant purchases on the pull-down tray in front of their seats. Even though these bentos were the Japanese equivalent of American takeout food, at least monetarily and conveniencewise, they were nothing like the greasy and messy paper sleeves holding hamburgers and fries, his go-to food back in Southern California.

No, instead these containers were filled with marinated carrots cut like maple leaves, rice balls formed in perfect triangles and dressed in spiffy suits of nori, and beautifully grilled and glazed pieces of fish.

Mas's mouth watered. He, of course, had eaten in the airplane, better food than he had anticipated. Everything was wrapped and had its own compartment or container. Even the water came in a bag that you could pour into a plastic cup.

Usually such organization eluded and frustrated him, but as soon as he left LAX to travel across the Pacific, he felt something happen to him—like a cord had been pulled, freeing the defensiveness he had felt all those years that he

lived in the US. California was his home, his birthplace. But in some places, even on his customers' lawns, he had to be on guard. He belonged, yet he didn't belong. Perhaps he would feel differently in Japan?

A female worker pushed a cart filled with box lunches, drinks, and souvenirs. Mas chose a small one with three rice balls, each one flavored a little distinctly. If anything could clear his head, it would be rice with the sour tang of pickled plum.

He also ordered a Coke, and was amused to be handed a can much skinnier than he was used to. He could completely wrap his fingers around this one—and when he was in the height of his gardening days, could probably have finished it off in one gulp.

For a moment he thought about buying a toy train for his only grandson, Takeo. But Takeo wasn't a child anymore. He was in high school, not interested in anything that didn't have a screen for digital images.

As the train zoomed forward, he heard only a low-volume whooshing sound against the window. The familiar scenes of rice paddies and farmhouses outside calmed him to no end. This was the Japan he remembered. The Japan that time had forgotten.

For a moment, he wished that Haruo wasn't stuffed in his suitcase but was fully alive, next to him, watching this scene. Haruo had gone back to Japan a couple of times with his daughter, but as far as Mas knew he'd had no strong desire to be buried here.

The request—or perhaps edict—came from Haruo's

older sister, Ayako. This sister, *nesan*, whom he had only heard of once in passing. Like Haruo, she'd been born in Fresno and taken to Hiroshima as a child. Unlike Haruo, she stayed in Japan. He wasn't sure why, because he understood that she'd never married. And she was ancient, almost ninety, but had had enough energy to call Haruo's widow, Spoon, every day.

Spoon, who was so hunched over now that she resembled a round piece of fruit, could barely sustain such persistent calls. Also, Ayako didn't seem to either recognize or honor that there was an international time difference that separated Hiroshima and Los Angeles by sixteen, seventeen hours. As a result, Spoon received these calls at two o'clock every morning.

Spoon wasn't able to make the international trip. And it wasn't like she could put Haruo in an envelope or old coffee can and send him off to Hiroshima. The task had to be in person, and as it turned out, Mas was the best and maybe the only available person for the job.

He, quite honestly, thought the whole idea was ridiculous. If it were him, he would have preferred to be blown in the California wind, scattered in the weeds, grass, and flowers, and end up on a sparrow's wing, unnoticed and without any fanfare.



She was holding a handwritten sign with his name in purple, "MASAO ARAI." And below it, in Japanese. The Japanese

was all in katakana, the script used for foreign names, not Japanese ones. Even the writing itself looked babyish, written by an outsider. The girl holding the sign was, in fact, an outsider. Her skin was dark, copper toned, and her eyes seemed too large for her head. Young men would deem her attractive, but to Mas, she seemed skinny and delicate. A child.

The lopsided suitcase behind him, Mas stood in front of the girl on the platform. In spite of her youth, she looked weary. She must have been waiting a long time.

“Are you Arai-san?” she asked.

He grunted. Haruo’s sister had indicated that she would send someone to pick him up from Hiroshima Station, but he didn’t imagine anyone who looked like this.

As he took a few more steps, it dawned on him. It was here. Not in this actual building, but in this physical space. This is where he had been. The bursting of atoms and molecules, the obliteration of the train station and the fire.

“Are you all right? *Daijobu?*”

He was doubled over his bag, and the girl helped him to his feet. Making sure that he was steady, she ran over to the vending machine next to the snack stand and got him a cold bottle of water.

The water was actually exactly what he needed. He felt immediately revived.

“Do you feel more comfortable speaking English or Japanese?”

He didn’t quite know how to answer that question. He didn’t enjoy speaking at all, especially as he grew older.

The words didn't come to either his mind or mouth that easily these days.

"My name is Thea." Anticipating any questions he might have, she added, "I'm from the Philippines."

Most of the signs in the airport and train platforms were not only in English, but also in Chinese and Korean. Something had happened to the town he had grown up in—the same thing that had happened in America. The world had entered in.

"You've had such a long trip. You must be very tired."

At least the girl had a semblance of common sense.

"Youzu how ole?" Mas finally said.

"Me?" Her face flushed slightly. She must get that question often. "Twenty. Mukai-*sensei* is my sponsor. She was my mother's nursing professor."

"Your mama here?"

Thea shook her head. "She is back in the Philippines. But she loved Japan, especially Hiroshima, so much. She told me that if I had the opportunity, I should come to Hiroshima, too." She took the half-empty water bottle from him and tightened the cap before stuffing it in her canvas bag next to her "MASAO ARAI" sign. "Do you feel strong enough to continue?"

He nodded, grabbing hold of the suitcase's retractable handle.

"I want to take you straight to the island."



They got into a taxi with Thea telling the driver in perfect Japanese that they wanted to go to Ujina Port. From there, Mas guessed, they would take a ferry to Ino Island.

Ayako Mukai lived in a nursing home on Ino. As a child, Mas had gone to the island to go hiking. Ino was called the Little Mount Fuji of Hiroshima. Aside from being the approximate sloped shape, the mountain was, of course, nothing like Mount Fuji. The thing that had impressed him the most was Ino's chorus of *semi*, cicada, which buzzed and screeched louder than anything he'd ever heard as a boy. The sound was so penetrating that it hurt his then-young developing ribs.

But after the Bomb fell, Ino's legacy had been forever altered. Mas didn't hear about the details until days later, when he had finally returned to his home from the middle of Hiroshima. The makeshift rafts, the lifeboats that people rode to escape the flattened and burning city, the black rain. Ino, which had once quarantined soldiers who'd been exposed to cholera, still had its buildings intact. There were places for ruined bodies to rest on the floor underneath a roof to shield them from the punishing heat. Ten thousand people had come to Ino seeking refuge. Unfortunately, far, far fewer were able to leave the island alive.

He wasn't that interested in revisiting the island, especially during the height of summer. Why would Ayako Mukai want to spend her last years, months, and days in a place marked by the *pikadon*, the blast of the atomic bomb? The anguished cries of his classmates had followed him to the other side of the Pacific Ocean, tormenting him in the

middle of the night. He couldn't imagine living in the midst of those ghosts today.

Reaching Ujina, they waited in a quiet port building, which was mostly empty. It looked relatively new, with high ceilings and a wall of glass that faced the ocean. In the distance was Ino, a mound of green. After waiting about half an hour, they walked outside to the landing, where about five or six young boys, little *yogore* troublemaker types, were running around causing mischief. A couple threw rocks into the water, while the others laughed and tossed a baseball cap, apparently the smallest boy's, to one another. Americans had the impression that Asian children were well behaved, but they had not been exposed to these unsupervised boys, who actually could have been Mas and his friends, once upon a time.

Their ferry appeared on the horizon, becoming larger and larger. It was at least a two-decker with a parking area for cars. "The last boat from Ino to Ujina is at eight in the evening," Thea said. "If you don't make that one, you're stuck on the island overnight." Not a great prospect, since there was only one inn on Ino, she explained.

The boys had run ahead to the ticket taker, who had walked down to the landing from the boat. Thea and Mas were last to board and before he could take out any yen that he had exchanged in Los Angeles before he departed, Thea handed two large coins to the ticket collector. The coins went into his leather satchel, which looked like an American woman's old-fashioned pocketbook. Mas made a move to pay Thea back, but she shook her head and laughed.

“Please. Mukai-*sensei* has taken care of everything.”

They climbed up a flight of stairs into an enclosed passenger area, rows of seats divided into three sections.

“I get a bit seasick, even on such a short trip like this. I’ll be outside. But please rest your feet.” Thea walked up one of the aisles through the door to a small deck. As the ferry began to move forward, her long, dark brown hair whipped behind her, evoking the image of a young pony overlooking a wide expanse of land.

He propped his legs across three seats in the back row. He realized that this was a very un-Japanese thing for an old man to be doing, but he didn’t care. This trip, which had just started, had already been rough on his battered body. He had a couple of hard candies in his jeans pocket and took them out, in addition to an old slim camera that Mari had given to him. He imagined Mari nagging him, *Dad, take some pictures while you’re there. You haven’t been there in almost fifty years.* To silence her, he pressed the shutter a good three, four times, not even paying attention to what he was photographing. *There, good enough?* he thought.

The main passenger area was relatively empty, aside from two rows of the rowdy teenage boys. They were still harassing the little one, who still didn’t have his baseball cap. Across the aisle from these boys was another one, maybe fourteen years old, who sat by himself. Mas noticed him for two reasons. First of all, his face was downcast, as if he were upset or stressed. Perhaps the boys had done something to him, too? Had he been ousted from the group for some reason? The other thing that made the boy stand out was his

T-shirt. It was bright red with a cable car on its back. When he abruptly stood up and turned, the words “San Francisco” on the front of the shirt caught Mas’s eye.

When he was nineteen, Mas had spent some time in San Francisco after working the strawberry fields in Watsonville. He lived in the home of a rich *hakujin* man, for whom he worked as a schoolboy, a term that Japanese Americans used for houseboy. It was a short-lived experiment. He was summarily fired when his benefactor discovered that friends and cousins had spent the night on the floor in his tiny servant’s quarters.

He did not regret that he had lost his schoolboy position. He wasn’t meant to answer to one boss. And San Francisco, with its colorful Fisherman’s Wharf, sourdough bread, and cable cars, was meant to be experienced to its fullest, at least until the money ran out.

He doubted that this brooding teen had spent any length of time in San Francisco. America was definitely not for the weak.



A car was waiting for them when they arrived in Ino. This was the main dock on the island, Thea said. A smaller landing on the east side was closer to the nursing home, but the big car ferry couldn’t dock there, the girl explained.

The boys ran off the boat, scattering like crabs into the narrow alleys of the small seaside village. Mas was relieved for the quiet. The sun again seemed to burn through his

clothing and he wished he'd brought his Dodgers cap to at least shield his eyes. A concrete *toro* gateway welcomed them to the island. Behind it was a simple shrine with a peaked roof covered in green patina, probably from saltwater exposure.

The driver of the car, Tatsuo, worked at the nursing home. Of an indeterminate age, he wore a loose white cotton uniform and awkward sandals on his stockinged feet. After placing the suitcase into the trunk, Tatsuo made sure his passengers were secured in their seats before driving forward. The narrow, winding highway could barely accommodate two cars going in opposite directions. Luckily, there weren't many vehicles to avoid, only an occasional motorbike or bicycle.

They passed the only inn on the island, a modest *ryokan* that looked like the type that offered meals of fresh fish and local vegetables. The driver made a left at what seemed the southernmost tip, the site of an expansive garden lined with sunflowers and dahlias, across from a large building that could have been a school.

The ocean was at low tide, revealing rows of racks holding oyster spats. When he was a boy in Hiroshima, Mas had assisted an uncle in threading large white scallop shells with rope. He wasn't quite sure how it worked, but somehow the baby oysters attached to the smooth inside surface of the shells.

"We don't eat oysters right now, though. It's off-season. I've heard that in the summer a bacteria can be spread to the oysters as they spawn." Thea then repeated what she said in

Japanese to Tatsuo and he nodded.

“Only certain kinds of oysters, though,” he said in Japanese. “We have all kinds now.”

Mas wasn't aware of the seasonal ban. He was a bit disappointed because he was looking forward to eating one of Hiroshima's specialties, *kaki furai*, or fried oysters.

“Tatsuo-*san* knows all about oysters. His uncle even has a factory here,” Thea reported.

The car finally stopped in front of a two-story institutional-looking building.

Mas was always a bit scared to go into any kind of nursing home. His biggest fear was to spend his last days trapped in one of these facilities. This one, though, seemed better than most. At least the ocean was a stone's throw away.

Leaving their shoes at the *genkan*, the recessed Japanese entryway, Thea helped him into oversized slippers made from some kind of synthetic material that was neither plastic nor nylon.

“Let's say hi to Mukai-*sensei*,” Thea said, taking hold of his suitcase. “She's usually in bed by seven o'clock.”

He again felt his stomach flip-flop. He didn't know much about Haruo's sister. Haruo had mentioned some brothers in Hiroshima and maybe Ayako in passing once. Or maybe Haruo did talk about his sister when Mas wasn't listening, which was actually quite often.

After being cleared to pass through a security door, they traveled down a wide corridor.

“Your suitcase wheel is broken,” Thea announced, a bit irritated with its awkward roll.

What else was new?

Finally they stopped in front of an open doorway. “Mukai-*sensei*—” Thea called out to someone lying in a hospital bed. “*Ojama shimasu*, pardon me for disturbing you.” She and Mas both bowed before entering the room. On one side was a private bathroom.

“So you are Mas Arai.”

At first he couldn’t make out the speaker’s features because of the sunlight through a picture window overlooking the ocean.

As his failing eyes acclimated to the light, he almost audibly gasped. The sister resembled Haruo so much—sans the ugly keloid scar that had marked the left side of his face.

“I am Ayako,” she said in English. Her voice had almost a regal tone.

He bowed again.

“Where is he?”

Mas realized that Ayako meant her brother. But how could he open up his suitcase to reveal his worn (but clean, of course) underwear bunched up next to the sock holding Haruo’s ashes? It was the ultimate embarrassment, a *haji* that he was loath to experience.

“Perhaps Arai-*san* can rest first. He’s had such a long day of travel.” Mas was grateful that Thea saved him.

“We have an extra room for guests here. I hope you can handle sleeping on a futon on the floor.”

What kind of Japanese did Ayako think he was?

“We will speak more later. Thea, show him where his room is.”

Mas felt like he was being officially dismissed—from what? This was not a queen's castle but a modest room in a nursing home on a remote island.

In the hallway, Thea whispered, "She's a bit frightening. I've gotten used to her."

At least Ayako's pompousness was not a figment of his imagination. He followed Thea to the guest room, which was a six-tatami-mat room, about a hundred square feet, with a sink behind a sliding door.

After helping him with his suitcase, she asked, "Is there anything more I can get for you?"

"Needsu to make phone call. My wife."

"Oh, I thought that—never mind, of course. You can use my cell phone."

Mas resisted. That was too much of an imposition.

"Okay, here, come to the office with me."

They returned to the lobby and entered the front office through a side door. Thea spoke briefly to Tatsuo, and Mas was brought over to a back room. After getting his home number, Thea dialed for him and handed him the receiver. A few strange rings and then it was his blessed wife on the line.

"Hello."

"Hallo."

"Mas, you made it. Thank God. Mari and I have been so worried. Where are you?"

"Ino Island."

"You must be exhausted."

He grunted.

“So you saw Haruo’s sister? She must have been so appreciative that you came all the way with his ashes.”

He didn’t mention anything about Haruo being smashed in his sock. “Yah,” he just managed to say.

He kept his conversation with Genessee brief. These international calls were expensive, and his intent was to let her know that he was still alive.

“Oh, by the way,” she interjected, “Mari wanted me to tell you that your niece has been calling her. She wants to know whether you’ll be visiting your family’s house.”

“Umm,” was all Mas said. He didn’t want to think about that now. He had a task to do. This was not about fun and games and going back home. Besides there was no one left in that home—at least no people that he knew.

After he finished his call, Thea was already sitting on the *genkan*, her shoes back on her feet.

“I have to go back to my apartment.... I’ll try to check in every day you are here,” she said.

As she rose, Mas was surprised that he wasn’t relieved. He wanted her to stay and be his advocate. There were too many unknowns on the island, a beautiful but somewhat brutal place.

“Oh, by the way,” Thea added, “there are sundowners here. So make sure you lock your door at night from the inside. The men’s bathroom is across from your room. Make sure to lock it, too, when you use it. They won’t hurt you, of course, but they might be a bit confused.”

He himself was a bit confused, and Thea, picking up on it, elaborated. “Sundowners are seniors who get a bit

agitated when the sun goes down. Who knows why it happens? A bit like vampires, *desho?*”



Thea's comment on the elderly vampires shook Mas a little. As soon as he locked himself in his room, he turned on the television. It was a modern flat screen but on the smallish side. There were only about seven channels available, and he chose a comedy show that featured strange-looking Japanese people spouting nonsense from a puffy couch. The comedians were ridiculous, but the audience laughter comforted him.

Zippering open his suitcase, he pulled out his pajamas and gazed at the sock stuffed with the plastic bag with Haruo's ashes. Haruo needed to be released from the old, faded sock. He placed the bag next to a vase holding a yellow silk rose on a low table by the television set.

That night, on the tatami floor, he found it difficult to sleep. It may have been jet lag—what time was it in California? He turned on the light and checked his watch. Eight a.m. in Los Angeles. He had reached his destination, so he should finally be able to relax. But in his gut he felt that something was not right.

His tiny room had a sink, and he went to it to splash water on his face. Thea had left the water bottle she'd purchased for him by the sink, and he finished it off. He didn't realize how dehydrated he was. He returned to the futon and may have slept for a few minutes, but then he opened

his eyes. Now he needed to go to the restroom.

He undid the lock on the door and looked both ways in the hallway. A dim light on one end revealed nothing but the large open corridor. He'd forgotten his slippers in his room, and the linoleum floor felt cold against his bare soles. He quickly went into the bathroom, fastened the bolt on the door, and did his business. Maybe now sleep could come.

The hallway was empty when he reentered his room. As he turned to slide close his door and lock it, he heard a rustling near his futon.

An old woman, her hair in disarray, stood on the other side of the tatami mat. She was wearing a *chanchanko*, a Japanese padded vest. For a moment, he thought her eyes were missing but then realized that her sockets were sunken in and obscured by loose flesh.

"Be careful. It's dangerous," she said. "Don't believe what they say."

Mas was so shocked he didn't know how to respond. There were alarms in the hallway to alert the staff. He took a few steps back and went out to the hallway to find the best way to call for help. But by the time he reached the alarm, he saw the woman leave his room and head for the other side of the hallway.

"*Baka*," he cursed at the disappearing woman. *Stupid*. She'd shaken him, but obviously she was harmless. He decided not to call anyone in the middle of the night. If he couldn't deal with a half-witted old resident, his days as an independent man were numbered.



Hampered by interrupted sleep, he was severely annoyed to be awakened by the intense light from the morning sun. The curtains were opaque, and there was no way to reduce the sunlight. *Shikataganai*, he thought—nothing can be done about it. His watch read twelve noon, so it was probably only four in the morning here in Hiroshima. He could not go back to sleep, so he decided to wander around outside.

In the lobby he traded his slippers for his shoes and waved at the worker behind the desk to open the glass doors. He walked up the concrete road, past small oyster-production factories covered in corrugated aluminum. Their operations seemed shuttered for the summer months. Stacks of threaded white scallop shells, resembling giant puka shell necklaces like the ones Mari wore in high school, were placed in piles on their sides. Plastic tubes that probably were used to connect the shells were packed upright in crates.

He had seen at least one man fishing from a cement platform and wondered what kind of fish could be caught in these waters. He himself was a surf fisherman—at least in his prime—and he loved the pull of the rod in his hands, the constant fight with the caught fish, a dance of release and then a quick reeling in.

Surprisingly, the surf did not smell as salty as the times he fished the Pacific Ocean from the shores of California. Instead of a polluted brown, the water had a greenish tint.

He looked toward a makeshift jetty, which housed a small boat with a motor. What was that floating in the water beside it?

A red flag? But it seemed attached to something. A knot of seaweed, perhaps? Curious, he walked down to the platform, made of gigantic bamboo poles, now weathered gray, that had been tied together with wire to planks of wood.

The way the red item bobbed in the water was suspect. It certainly was not from the sea. As he got closer, he almost lost his breath. He could make out a head of black hair about two inches underwater. He should have immediately gone for help, but the floating body was calling out to him.

He broke loose a deteriorating bamboo pole from the jetty and pulled the body toward him. As the body turned in the water, the face, bloated and fleshy, came to the surface. The eyes were closed, but the mouth was open. A small dark fish darted in and out from the lips. The red that Mas had seen from the hill above had been a T-shirt that the floating body was wearing—with “San Francisco” emblazoned across its chest.