Endurance

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Please leave. I want you to go.'

The man nodded, put his hand in his suit pocket and pulled out a business card. He said he was staying at the Penn's View Hotel. His flight home was in a few days. He offered me the card but I did not take it. He reached again into his pocket and this time produced a letter, crumpled by age or the journey undertaken. 'This will help explain why I'm here today, why it's taken me so long to find you.' I did not move and the envelope and card trembled in his grip. 'Please, you will find the contents difficult, but helpful.'

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

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

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

Human Feelings

Ninjo: Japanese people believe that love, affection, compassion and sympathy are the most important feelings that all human beings should nurture. This assumption emanates from the fact that one of the virtues that Japanese society emphasises is cooperation among people. In daily life, Japanese people are bound by the code of ninjo in their attitudes towards others. Suppose that you are sent many apples by your relative. Then you will want to give some to your neighbours. This 'give and take' attitude is based on the belief in the wisdom of mutual reliance.

I try to imagine how Yuko would look if she were alive today but instead I see her thin from the privations and worry of war, head bowed by the weight of the burden she carries. She sits on a pew with her back to me inside those red bricks of the cathedral. Light from the west illuminates her back; her hair is cut short to her shoulders. I want to call out, warn her to go home. She needs to go far from Urakami and she must leave now. But the words do not come and instead I see her slowly turn round until I must close my eyes before they meet her gaze. Dear daughter, the life I sought for you was not a bad one, was it? Could you understand why I acted the way I did? Could you see I had no choice? Only child, did you forgive me in those final moments? Did you forgive yourself? I want to believe she was at peace when the clouds parted over Nagasaki and that B-29 dropped its load. I cannot bear to think of those last moments as a torment for her. I need her to have died if not content, then maybe reconciled to the decisions she made as she prayed to her god. My husband and I would tell each other when pikadon fell over the north of the city her body would have evaporated: bones, organs, even the ash of her, gone in an instant. We were adamant she had felt nothing and this gave us a kind of solace. The absence of a body to bury or cremate helped us sustain this version of her death: she had not suffered on August 9, 1945 at 11.02am.

No, I am not haunted by how she died but why. If I am to be the only remaining teller of this tale, what and how much can I admit to myself and to others? Should I begin with this acknowledgement? My daughter might be here today if it had not been for me. I tell myself I acted out of love and a mother's selflessness but how important is the motivation when you consider the consequence? The darker truth is this: she wouldn't have been in the cathedral unless I had insisted that she meet me there. I have carried that knowledge with me through these long years. Not even Kenzo knew. What an impossible admission to tell a husband and a father. I taught myself to carry this guilt lightly so that no one could see the monster in their midst, but sometimes when my guard was down, I would tell Kenzo I wished it had been me that the bomb had claimed. He would hold me in his arms and say he too would swap places with Yuko and Hideo if he could. He would reassure me there was nothing that could change what had happened, forces beyond our control had taken them. We were all victims, only he and I had lived, that was all. He did not understand what I meant: death's greatest cruelty is to claim the wrong people. Sometimes the weakest live.

I convinced myself an edited version of my past was necessary for a bearable life. I told myself I must not think too long on the mistakes I had made that led Yuko to the city's death zone. How else could I get up in the morning and face another day? How else could I endure the years as they trickled by, one too slowly following the other? Me, the last one left, or so I had believed until that winter's morning of January 22, 1983. I had thought leaving Japan would keep Kenzo and me safe from the past. When people asked me about my life before America I changed details I didn't like, underplayed or erased entire years depending on my mood or audience. Sometimes my inquisitors made the connection between my age, Nagasaki and the war. Too curious perhaps to retreat from their question, they would ask in the embarrassed tone of the victor: were you there that day? I could not lie about this one fact but at least my poor English helped. It allowed me to reduce my account to a few nouns, weak adjectives, a verb in the wrong tense. '*Grandson and daughter kill, gone. Too sad. Big problem for me.*' In response, they grasped for the best words to use, so as not to confuse my limited language: how terrible, just horrible, simply awful, you are very brave. I hated that word, brave. It implied choice. Others hid behind my poor understanding of English to tell me what they really thought, and I guessed at what they said. Those bombs ended the war; think of the thousands of lives saved by your daughter's death; at least you and your husband have each other. Such casual dismissal of the loss. This was the survivor's sorrow: people expected you to be grateful. I didn't edit my past for sympathy, or persuasion; I did it to ease the guilt just enough to function. These lies or omissions gave me the strength to look in the mirror and be able to stand the woman I saw. And yet, if called upon to turn the magnifying glass on my past, how to cleave fact from fiction? My memory had intertwined the two like wild nasturtium to some rotting trellis, inextricable, the one dependent on the other. This man who had stood at my door would want to know the truth. What a request to ask. To look back would bring neither forgiveness nor release.

I took the letter he had given me into the kitchen and sat at the table by the window. The red formica shone with bleach, the plastic jars by the cooker stood neat in line and only the hum of the refrigerator broke the silence. We had bought it not long before Kenzo fell ill. He insisted on buying an American brand, Frigidaire, which came with an ice dispenser. He loved to press against the lever with a plastic tumbler and watch the chunks of ice clatter down. 'America,' he declared that first time, shaking his head in wonder. 'What will you think of next?' I had planned to feed him good meat and fresh vegetables but in those last weeks he wanted nothing more than processed food in tins. Macaroni and cheese, spaghetti-os and corned beef delighted him the most. His last meal before he went into hospital had been vanilla ice cream and chocolate syrup. He watched me from the kitchen table, leaning heavy against the chair, as I squirted Reddi-wip into the bowl and brought him his dessert. We sat across from each other and held hands while he ate a few shaky spoonfuls. A drop of cream rested on his unshaven chin. 'Good?' I asked. 'Good,' he replied. I could not help myself, I leaned forward and wiped the white blob away with my thumb. 'Let me give you a shave, you look like a wild man.' He shook his head. 'My skin hurts.'

'I bring you good news.' Those were the words the man had used. I looked at the white envelope in front of me, the thick paper, *Amaterasu Takahashi* printed in neat black ink. The last time I had seen my name written in kanji was eight years after we left Japan, in a letter sent by my former maid, Misaki Goto. Her daughter was getting married, we were invited, she would be so happy if we could make the journey from America to Nagasaki. I was delighted for her but sent my sincere apologies. I hope she understood why I could not go back even for such a joyous event. Instead I shipped off a painting of the Rocky Mountains, even though Kenzo and I had never visited. We had moved from California to Pennsylvania not long after receiving the invitation and Misaki and I lost touch. I had kept in contact with no one else, which forced me to ask the question: who could be writing to me?

I glanced up to a picture framed in black wood on the wall. The sun had bleached the figures but you could still see Hideo dressed in his school uniform, standing between his parents, Yuko and Shige. On August 9, every year, Kenzo would bring out his best malt, imported from Scotland, in preparation for the day. We would work our way through the bottle, the peat flavour smoky on our tongue, and my husband would create new stories for our dead grandson. Some years he was a sailor, on others a lawyer, or sometimes a poet who lived in the mountains. He was handsome and kind and witty. He had a brood of solid children or a mistress from France. His life had been joyful and exotic and full of adventure.

The man at my door did not fit this movie house picture. This was not the ending I wanted for any of us. Here was another monster raised from the rubble of Nagasaki. I did not believe him. This envelope could not contain good news and yet still I walked to the cutlery drawer, retrieved a small knife and returned to my chair. The blade slid too easily through the paper. I took out the note, laid it flat on the table and read the signature. Two words rocketed towards me, only two words, but what words: Natsu Sato. The doctor's wife. Sweat prickled across my body. I walked to the window, and even though the street was empty, I drew down the venetian blinds. I could have thrown Natsu's letter in the garbage; I could have turned on the TV too loud and drowned out the possibilities of its contents, but instead I sat back in the kitchen chair and began to read.

To Amaterasu Takahashi,

Firstly, I must apologise for the shock of this revelation. The man that you have no doubt just met is your grandson, Hideo Watanabe. I can confirm this. You may have little reason to believe me, but I do not lie. Hideo didn't die that day, he survived. Is that not marvellous to know? But as you will have seen, he was severely wounded during pikadon. So injured in fact that the authorities could not identify him. He was sent away from the city a year after the end of the war to an orphanage for child victims. This is where my husband found him and where we later discovered who he was. You would have already left for America by this time. It took many years for us to find you. As luck would have it, a former employee of yours, Mrs Goto, read an article about our peace organisation that mentioned Hideo's birth name. She contacted me and provided an address for you and your husband, an old one, as it turns out. We are trying to locate your whereabouts as I write. I apologise for this delay. I can only imagine the confusion this must be causing you.

My husband and I decided to adopt Hideo. We brought him back to Nagasaki and he grew into an accomplished man. But I will let him tell you his own story. We are proud of him as I know you will be. Hideo has a package for you. This will help you understand what happened all those years ago, should you wish to know. I have not shown Hideo this package. Whether you do or do not I will leave to your discretion, but I ask that you read the contents first. I'm sure when you have, you will know how best to proceed. I return your grandson to you today not only because I can but also because I want to. This final act is the least I can do after so many years of forced separation. I hope he will bring you as much joy as he has brought happiness to our small family.

Yours in sincerity, Natsu Sato

There was no date, a message caught in the vacuum of time. I folded the letter up and walked out of the kitchen, down the windowless hall to our bedroom in perpetual gloom from the the holly shrubs planted outside. Kenzo had first taken me to see our home in Chestnut Hill in 1956. 'I've found the perfect spot for us. It's a commute for me, but it is beautiful, very traditional.' The Victorian house was painted green with a white wooden porch and set back from a quiet street lined by beeches. As a realtor showed us around, I whispered to my husband that it felt gloomy. He was prepared for my objection. 'We'll paint it with strong colours, pale wood, bring the light inside.' Ever the engineer, he saw brighter possibilities among the shadows. He hired carpenters to replace the oak wardrobes in the bedroom with maple.

'Reminds me of cherry wood,' Kenzo said, running his hand down a panel. Decorators painted the walls yellow. In Japan this had been the colour of lost love, here it meant the sunshine. I bought a rose print duvet, pictures of purple mountains for the walls and lilac cotton curtains so flimsy you could see your hands through them. When we were done, we stood in the doorway and appraised our rendition of an American life. Kenzo asked, 'You like it? It's much brighter, yes?' I nodded. He never realised: he was my only sunlight after the war.

We'd lived in that home together for sixteen years. When Kenzo died in 1972 I'd considered moving but where? At least here I had a routine of sorts, the territory was known, the boredom familiar. I filled the silence with the noise of wildlife documentaries, rolling news, soaps. Without him, mornings could go by with me just sitting on the couch. At night, I began to drink neat whisky in growing amounts, the curtains drawn. You live with loneliness long enough and it becomes a kind of company. Besides, those solid walls and polished floorboards contained all I had left of my family. I still saw Kenzo sitting on the couch reading the newspaper, filling in forms or shouting answers at a quiz show, proud of having mastered this foreign language enough to make it almost his own. My resistance to learning English had provoked arguments, but what could he do, force me to read textbooks, march me to classes? 'Contrary, stubborn, wilfully ignorant,' he would say in those early yearsbefore Chestnut Hill, when we lived north of San Francisco, near Mare Island and close to the shipyard. He'd speak in Japanese and then translate the words into his adopted tongue. 'Ugly words, ugly language,' I would reply in English, trying to mimic the accent to prove my point. Kenzo would shake his head and go back to his crossword, which I noted with cruel satisfaction, he could not do.

One Christmas a year or so into our American life he gave me a book wrapped in gold tissue. The paper cover was the colour of a red autumn poppy with the texture of frost on a windowpane. The kanji was translated as: *An English Dictionary of Japanese Culture*. Kenzo smiled at me. 'I thought this could be a compromise. See, the Japanese is here, and the English is on the other side.' I flicked through the pages, some decorated with crude black and white sketches. I read one of the entries: *Wabi. A simple and austere type of beauty. The word is derived from the verb wabu (to lose strength) and the adjective wabishi (lonely). Originally, it meant the misery of living alone away from society. Later, it gained a positive aesthetic meaning: the enjoyment of a quiet, leisurely and carefree life.'* I wrapped the gift back in the sheath of delicate gold and asked him where he had found the book. He reached for another parcel. 'You can get anything in the USA. You just need to know who to ask.' I flashed him a skeptical look. 'Honestly, Amaterasu, sushi, teppanyaki, even shabu-shabu, they're all here. America is the world.' He never understood my reasons for not learning the language. This country was shelter from pikadon but it was not home, the people were not my own, I did not want to be close to them.

In the bedroom, I went to Kenzo's side of the wardrobe, opened the door and eased myself to my knees. We were 44 and 51 years old when we left Japan in 1946, too old for a new life but too broken to remain in the one we had known. We took two trunks stuffed with pictures, documents and the rags we called clothes, most dyed khaki, the National Defence Colour. Smuggled inside those trunks were other mementoes that I stored away without Kenzo's knowledge. When he died, I moved these few small items to my husband's side of the wardrobe, so he could share them at last. Beneath his clothes, ties and jumpers, I reached into the recesses and pulled out a shoebox, placed Natsu's letter inside and slid the box to the back wall. I picked up another box, slowly rose to my feet and sat on the edge of the bed. The weight of the contents was heavy on my lap. I ran my hands over the lid, sticky with age, and removed the top. One thought hammered in my mind: why should I trust the wife of Jomei Sato, the man I also blamed for my daughter's death?

Pathos

Mono-no-aware: A feeling of sympathetic pity aroused by the pathos of things. In its more technical sense, it refers to an element in experience or in artistic representation evoking compassion, and/or to a capacity for appreciating such an element. Mono-no-aware constitutes reflective contemplation and aesthetic appreciation of natural beauty and human existence.

Nagasaki still feels more real to me than this old Victorian house. The nights spent alone in my bed take me back to our home on the hill with its view of the city growing inland from the narrow entrance of the harbour. Our house stood in a garden of chinaberry, purple maple and blue beech. Two-storeys of black wood rose up to a triangular roof topped with slate tiles. A carved trim ran down the eaves, and each beam was decorated with metal work of dragons and ships coated in verdigris. The god of war straddled a wild boar over the main entrance. Inside, the family room was first on the left, lined with tatami mats, the woven rice straw bordered in green and gold silk. Black lacquer chests ran along one side of the room and a square table and four cushions sat in the middle. Scrolls of calligraphy hung on the walls and to the left was the long window to the garden and to the right the alcove that contained the family shrine: a small Buddha, a candlestick, an incense burner, a bell and a mallet. Typical, yes, but ours.

When I think of our home, I see Yuko sitting in this room, bathed in the glow of rape myrtles, oleanders and canna. She seems a trick of the light, a chimera created by a weak sun on wood panels. I see her pick up a cream tea bowl with her right hand. She turns the bowl clockwise in her outstretched palm. Next she pours hot water from the teapot over the green powdered tea and picks up the bamboo whisk. She stirs until the liquid froths and bubbles like spittlebug foam on

grass and then she passes the bowl to me. She is dressed in a kimono the shade of young winter cherries, or camellia, but always red, the colour of happiness, of life, of the womb.
All I had left of her had been reduced to the contents of a few shoeboxes. As I sat on the bed, the damp of the cardboard nipped my nostrils. I held her notebook in my hand. The green leather binding had disintegrated, and crumbs of paper dust glittered on my fingers. On the inside cover she had written her name in careful script. *Yuko Takahashi*. Later her surname would be replaced with *Watanabe*. My daughter's untouched diaries. As I flipped through I saw her sitting at her desk, writing. I saw the indent of the pen against her middle finger. Kenzo had wept with defeat when he found a shopping list she had left on her kitchen table after we went to her home in the days following the bomb. *Flour, needle, soap*. Three words. Imagine thousands of them. I closed the diary, held the solidity of it to my chest for a moment, and then put it back in the box. Neither of us was ready for the intrusion of my reading that delicate kanji of hers.

Next, I opened a folded square of paper. The lines of charcoal were faded but clear enough. The perspective was fine but there was something awkward in the composition, as if the artist had been trying to cram too much detail in to the space. On the bottom right of the sketch, Yuko had written the place and date:*Iōjima, August 22, 1936*.

The summer had been a fierce one. The humidity stained everyone's clothes as if it was rain and the air burnt deep into lungs. I could feel that heat as I looked at the contours of the face before me, the high cheekbones, the neat moustache, that mole. I could see the charcoal smudged between Yuko's fingertips; I could picture the sheen of sweat as she worked; I could feel her longing. His expression was as unfathomable as it had always been. I placed the sketch facedown. I did not want to think of Jomei Sato. I did not want to remember him, or that brutal summer, or that last morning all those years later.

New unanswered fears gripped me. How had Hideo survived? Kenzo and I looked for him; we were sure pikadon took him. How to face the possibility that he might have been alive all those years since? And if that were true, how had the doctor and his wife managed to adopt him? This could be no coincidence. Perhaps the man on my doorstep was another victim of the doctor's, or an accomplice. How pathetic of Sato to wait this long to take revenge. No punishment could match all the years lived since August 9, 1945.