

Nine Muses... and a Wife



A Literary Memoir With Related Fiction

CLINT HULL

A writer uses memoir, poetry, and fiction to identify nine women who influenced his career: a girl in Japan, a college love, a bar girl, a pilgrim to Lourdes, two cousins in Vienna, a night nurse, a divorcee, a poetess at a workshop.

Nine Muses... and a Wife

By Clint Hull

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Other Works by Clint Hull

New England Genesis: A Trilogy

*New England Dreams, A Novel Based on the Life of Reverend Joseph
Hull*

*New England Wakes A Novel of Tristram Hull and the First Quakers,
New England Rising: A Novel of Conflict and Revolt in the Colonies*

Occupying Powers

A Novel of World War II and the Occupation of Japan

Kimi and Yoshi

In the spring of 1946 I was assigned to the 1st Medical Squadron of the 1st Cavalry Division with headquarters at Camp Drake, some twenty miles north of Tokyo. My duties included ordering medical supplies from a depot in Yokohama and issuing them to units throughout the division. It was a responsible position; and having worked in a drugstore, I was well qualified for the task.

Although I viewed military service as an unwelcome interruption of my life, I was not unhappy. I had found a niche for myself in the army. My fear of failing to measure up physically and socially was largely behind me. I had survived fifteen weeks of basic training, the anxiety of replacement depots, and three months as a combat medic in an infantry division. I had the Philippine Liberation Medal and a medical valor badge for a combat patrol in the hills of Cebu. But now that the war was over, I just wanted to go home, enroll in college, and get on with my life.

My attitude toward life in the army changed with the arrival of a replacement who quickly became my buddy. His cheerful outgoing personality was an effective antidote for my gloomy and reserved attitude toward army life. He persuaded me that as long as we were in Japan, we should see something of the country. We had a Class A pass that allowed us to leave camp whenever we were not on duty. The army provided truck transportation to the center of Tokyo, where we took

advantage of the Red Cross canteen, the transient enlisted men's mess at the Imperial Hotel, and the Ernie Pale Theater.

But our activities while on pass soon became routine and repetitious. We weren't seeing the city as the Japanese knew it. The obvious solution was to find two friendly native women who would serve as guides to the Tokyo area. My buddy promptly enlisted the services of two Japanese women who were employed at a quartermaster laundry near our barracks. One worked in the front office and had a fair knowledge of English. The other worked in the folding room. We dubbed them Kimi and Yoshi. They accepted their nicknames with good humor. They had dark hair and engaging smiles. Their round faces were unblemished and free of makeup. At work they wore a plain skirt and blouse, socks and sandals. They looked like schoolgirls.

My buddy laid claim to Kimi. She was regarded at the laundry as stand-offish, but she seemed eager to talk to us and expand her knowledge of English. We would visit the laundry on our lunch break and chat with the women. I spoke chiefly with Kimi, and I didn't notice whether she translated what I said.

In time we persuaded the women to show us the sights in and around Tokyo. We would meet them at some station on the Yamate Belt Line and set off to explore a nearby park or shrine. Kimi chose our destination, often keeping it secret until we were under way.

Our first excursion was to the Tokyo zoo. The animal population had been greatly depleted during the war. On subsequent weekends we visited a household museum in Uno Park, the imperial gardens at Shinjoku, a temple at Asakusa, and a water park at Inariyama. Sunday afternoons often found us seated in the balcony at Hibiya Hall for a concert by the Nippon Philharmonic. Our most ambitious excursion

was to Kanda beach some miles east of Tokyo. Beaches were off limits for military personnel, but we got away with it.

My buddy spoke openly to me of his desire to have sex with Kimi, but our opportunities for physical contact were limited to dances sponsored by the laundry. Kimi was soft and pliant in my arms, whereas Yoshi seemed rather tense and rigid. That summer while my buddy was confined to an army hospital in Tokyo, he asked me to fill in for him at an upcoming dance. Yoshi was indisposed, so I had Kimi to myself. In the course of the evening she said she liked me because I was different from other soldiers. And in an army truck that took the women home after the dance, she sat trustingly on my lap and went to sleep. My feelings, long suppressed by loyalty to my buddy, were aroused. I told myself that I was in love with her.

Following the truck ride I had no further physical contact with Kimi. I made arrangements for her to visit my buddy at the hospital. Her obvious joy made it clear which of us she preferred. I had to content myself with a memory of a dance and a truck ride.

Meanwhile, Yoshi was taking lessons to improve her English. She made a few offers of friendship, but my heart belonged to another. Kimi taught me a popular Japanese song, and we sang it on our lunch breaks. I reveled in her company and envied my buddy for his preferred position. Aware that sex was on his agenda, I derived some consolation from Kimi's refusal to go out with him alone. We remained a foursome until I got my orders to return to the States to be discharged.

* * *

I regard the two women as a single muse because we remained a foursome to the end and because my affection for Kimi was constrained

by the knowledge that she was my buddy's girl. I gave little thought to how Yoshi felt. My primary concern was my own feelings.

I realize now that these two women had a profound influence on my life. That truck ride with Kimi on my lap was instrumental in resolving my sexual ambiguity. I thank my buddy for identifying and fulfilling our need for women. Knowing that Kimi was his girl and that I was due to be discharged allowed me to give free rein to my feelings without concern for the future. I went home satisfied that I had loved a woman.

Several years later I paid a visit to my buddy. He said that he and Kimi had continued to see each other after I went home. She allowed him to touch her breasts, but she steadfastly refused to have sex with him. I was glad of that. Somehow it validated my own feelings toward her.

Kimi and Yoshi were chapter one on my road to marriage and to becoming a writer. They remain in my thoughts to this day. What more can one ask of a muse?

* * *

Kimi and Yoshi served as models for the two Japanese women in *Occupying Powers*, my novel about World War II and the occupation of Japan. Their portraits and the course of our relationship, as presented there, are reasonably accurate. Work on the novel began shortly after I retired in 1986. At a writers workshop in 1991 my advisor told me that I was not ready to write novels and advised me to devote my efforts to short stories. I heeded her advice and set the novel aside.

Occupying Powers was finally published in 2013. The chapter titled "Nikko" describes the culmination of my relationship with the two women. I allowed myself considerable authorial license in this chapter.

Nine Muses... and a Wife

My buddy and I did visit Nikko, but the women were not with us. In a late version of the novel the outcome was more in line with the facts; but I was persuaded by my readers that, unlike life, fiction demands a resolution.

Nikko

Nikko was Merrill's idea. The two women looked as surprised as Chet felt. In agreeing to Merrill's plan, he had not envisioned anything so ambitious or so distant.

"That's eighty miles away," he said. "Our passes are only good up to fifty miles."

Merrill ignored his objection.

"Not see Nikko in one day," Yoshi said.

"We can stay overnight," Merrill said.

Kimi frowned. "That not good idea."

Merrill did not persist. On leaving the laundry, Chet gave stronger voice to his objection. "We've already accomplished what we set out to do by dating the women. Shiga Heights was proof of that. Dragging them up to Nikko won't do any good."

"That's easy for you to say," Merrill replied. "You're not hooked on Yoshi. I want more from Kimi than a hug and a kiss good-bye."

"Have you asked yourself how she feels about it?"

"She's not sure how she feels. I have to make up her mind for her."

"Suppose she does give in. What happens to her after you go home?"

"We've got a whole year ahead of us to work that out."

"Promise that you'll keep her best interest in mind."

"Don't worry," Merrill said. "Kimi has a mind of her own."

Several days passed, and Chet considered it a dead issue; so he was surprised by Merrill's announcement over coffee at the Red Cross canteen.

"They've agreed to go to Nikko with us."

"How did you manage that?" Chet asked.

"I just converted our weakness into strength."

"What do you mean? What weakness?"

"You know. What happened in the pool. What almost happened at Shiga Heights."

"You told Kimi about that?"

"I said we'd be in big trouble unless she and Yoshi agreed to spend a night with us. I'm not sure that she understood what I was getting at, but she must know what I have in mind."

"You mean she actually agreed to sleep with you?"

"Not exactly," Merrill said. "She insisted on separate rooms, and I had to promise that I wouldn't do anything she doesn't want."

"Are you satisfied with that?"

"I had no choice. We'll work something out after we get there."

"What about her parents?"

"She'll tell them she's staying with Yoshi."

"And Yoshi will be spending the night with her."

"I suppose so. That's their problem."

Chet wasn't sure that Yoshi needed permission to go to Nikko. He knew very little about her life outside the laundry. For him and for Merrill she served as a necessary adjunct to Kimi, someone who made their excursions possible.

"When are we going?" he asked.

"Next weekend. Kimi is making the arrangements."

Chet had no desire to go to Nikko. Not that he was afraid to break the rules regarding travel. He had done that before. But how could he endorse a plan that threw Merrill and Kimi so close together? Yet he had agreed to support his friend in this undertaking. To back out now might alienate Kimi as well as Merrill. The fact that he would be there may have weighed in her decision. He took some comfort in the promise she had extracted and the conditions she had imposed. He could only hope that his presence might delay what seemed inevitable.

They met Kimi and Yoshi on Saturday morning at Uno station. The women appeared to have difficulty maintaining their usual composure. They had little to say while waiting to board the train. They exchanged frequent glances and smiled self-consciously when addressed. The train to Nikko had a military car, so they couldn't sit together. Merrill was clearly disappointed, but Chet felt it was more comfortable for everyone that way.

All he knew about Nikko was that it was a national park with temples, a sacred bridge, and a waterfall. Kimi had given them a pamphlet in English describing the park and its history. He attempted to read it on the journey north; but was baffled by the detailed explanations of the Taussig Shrine and the Tokugawa Shogunate. He gave it up, turning his attention instead to the passing landscape -- a patchwork of green and brown cultivated fields. He had read in *Stars and Stripes* that most farmers were sharecroppers, and that MacArthur was having some success in getting landowners to distribute their holdings to tenants. When Merrill expressed little interest in the subject, Chet brought up the purpose of their trip.

“What’s our strategy when we get to Nikko?”

“I don’t know what sort of arrangements Kimi made,” Merrill said, “but we’ve got to find a way to separate the two women.”

“So we just wait until we know how things stand.”

“I guess so, but I’m not waiting too long. Why did Kimi agree to come, if she doesn’t want to sleep with me?”

“Maybe that’s part of her arrangements,” Chet said.

Merrill’s face brightened. “I hope you’re right,” he said.

When they got off the train, Kimi hefted her cloth satchel and led the way up a narrow and steep lane behind the station. Nikko looked much the same as other villages Chet had seen, with wood paneled houses, streets clean swept, and manicured gardens. There was no evidence of bombings or fires. At a bend in the lane Chet paused to view the hillside across the river -- a tapestry of gates and temples set amongst ancient cedars. The beauty and symmetry of the scene lifted his spirits, and he had to hurry to catch up.

The women paused in front of a house nestled into the hillside. After exchanging a few words, Kimi mounted the stone steps to the entrance. Chet and Merrill hung back, unsure what was expected of them. She returned with a woman, stooped, her face wrinkled with age. Kimi treated her with the utmost respect. The old woman showed them up to their rooms. Kimi and Yoshi bowed to her at every juncture. Chet found himself bowing too out of courtesy. Merrill started to follow Kimi into her room, but the woman took his arm and directed him to the room adjoining. Sliding back the paneled door, she motioned for them to remove their combat boots before entering. When they had complied with her orders, she turned to leave.

“*Arrogate*,” Merrill said, bowing to her.

She smiled to acknowledge his thanks.

The room contained only a lacquered cabinet, a low table, a number of cushions, and a pair of quilts that resembled sleeping bags.

“I’m not used to sleeping on the floor,” Chet said as he felt the quilts.

“Who cares about sleep?” Merrill said.

They had no time for further discussion. Kimi was already at the door

“We go now to Taussig,” she said.

“How far is it?” Merrill asked.

“First must cross Daiwa river.”

The guest house was close by the sacred bridge that spanned the river. Chet had read that its color was from human blood, but Kimi made no mention of that. He decided not to question her about it. They paused on the bridge to view the deep gorge and swiftly flowing water below.

“River go to Egon waterfall,” she said. “Maybe see tomorrow.”

The entrance to the grounds of the Taussig shrine was several hundred yards from the bridge. After climbing a number of stone steps and passing under several *torii*, they reached a five-story pagoda similar to the one at Uno park in Tokyo.

“Why five stories?” Chet asked. “Why not four or six?”

Kimi seemed puzzled by the question. Then her face brightened. “One story for earth, water, fire, wind, and.”

“Space,” Chet offered. “The void.”

“That right,” she agreed.

They moved on to the main gate of the shrine – “*Omotemon*,” Kimi called it. In Chet’s estimation it was not so much a gate as a passage through a temple. Two larger-than-life figures flanked the passage, standing warriors with a fierce aspect, their weapons ready. When he asked about them, Kimi spoke of Nioh statues and Deva kings who guarded a mountain somewhere. It had little meaning for him.

They passed through the gate to an inner court enclosed by buildings of various shapes, sizes, and degrees of ornamentation. Kimi led the way to the hall of a rather modest temple.

“Must hear dragon cry,” she said.

The dragon she referred to was a large ceiling mural painted largely in gold and black. Kimi ordered them to listen as an attendant struck two sticks together under the dragon’s head. The women were pleased with the result, but Chet heard only the clap of sticks. Not sure what else he was supposed to hear, he smiled in appreciation. Merrill was also smiling.

Satisfied, Kimi moved on to the royal stables. There a carved wooden panel -- one of several -- depicted three monkeys with their hands covering eyes, ears, or mouth. They were colorfully painted as in a cartoon, and Chet found it hard to take them seriously.

“See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil,” he said, trying to adopt an appreciative tone.

Yoshi, who had been quiet thus far, muttered something in Japanese.

“Yoshi say Chinese have four monkeys,” Kimi translated. “Also one that do no evil.”

Was this a word of caution? Or was the absence of a fourth monkey an omen of what lay ahead of him in Nikko? He had no time to reflect on these thoughts, for Kimi was leading them up a flight of stone steps to another gate even more elaborately decorated.

“*Yomeimon*,” she said. “Mean twilight gate. Can look all day, still not see all.”

This gate was indeed a temple, a top-heavy temple decorated with hundreds of mythical animals and humans, all carved in wood and painted in vivid red, green, and gold. Chet focused his gaze upon a pair

of figures that he fancied to be sages discussing some weighty philosophical topic. But like the monkeys, they struck him as caricatures. The gate evoked in him a sense of wonder and curiosity quite different from the awe inspired by the bronze Buddha at Kamakura. He felt as if he were in a museum. Although Kimi was doing her best to interpret the religious significance of the shrine as they proceeded, her words bewildered him. The craftsmanship was admirable, but no more meaningful than the babble of people who smiled at them in passing.

Despite the mixed crowd of Japanese and GI's, Chet felt cut adrift. In Tokyo he was an occupying soldier, anchored and self-sufficient. Nikko was a foreign land, where he was dependent on their guides and the good will of the populace. The feeling was not unpleasant, yet it caused him some apprehension. He glanced at Merrill, who had eyes only for Kimi.

Extending out on either side of the twilight gate were two gallery wings with more wood carved panels depicting exotic birds and animals. These were at eye level. Chet examined a few before Kimi beckoned to them to move on. They entered another court with more temples and sheds. Ahead of them another flight of steps led up to the next gate -- Kimi called it *Karamon*. She drew their attention to the carving of a sleeping cat above the gate. She spoke with evident pride. Chet gathered that the carving was famous, but he saw only a fanciful and uninteresting representation of a cat.

Beyond this gate a curved flight of steps led upward between rows of trees to some as yet unseen goal. With no summit in sight, Chet felt that the height to which one could ascend in this place was limited only by aspiration and stamina. They continued to climb – Chet counted more than a hundred steps – until they reached a level space simply

landscaped and surrounded by tall trees. A single-story temple, rather plain and decorated in black and gold, stood in the center of this space. They all stopped as if on command.

“Hold spirit of Tokogawa Ieyasu,” Kimi said.

A sign on the building read, “Off Limits to Military Personnel.” Chet smiled. Was this an omen that Merrill’s plan was doomed to fail? Did Kimi and Yoshi have such a sign posted on their bodies? Would entry to their innermost shrine be denied them? Merrill moved toward the building, but Kimi stopped him.

“Only Shogun permitted to worship inside,” she said.

She led the way to a nearby grave site where the body of the Shogun was buried. Several stones carved and set to form a temple marked the spot, but they were devoid of any ornament or inscription. Chet saw in this a commentary on the transitory nature of earthly grandeur. In the simplicity of death all is left behind.

Darkness overtook them as they left the shrine and returned to the house. The women joined them in their room for the evening meal. Seated on cushions around the low table, they feasted on the Vienna sausage, soda crackers, and canned fruit that Merrill had obtained from the mess hall. A servant girl delivered a pot of tea brewed by the old woman. Chet caught a glimpse of her face as Kimi took the tray from her at the door. He thought she looked familiar.

“I’ve had my fill of shrines,” Merrill said as they ate. “What else is there to see?”

“Tomorrow go to Kegan waterfall,” Kimi said.

“Sounds good to me. What do we do tonight?”

“Maybe take hot bath.”

“Now you’re talking!” Merrill said.

When they had eaten, Yoshi excused herself. She left the room and returned with white robes. Kimi called them *yukata* and said they should be worn at the baths. The women left, and Chet and Merrill quickly shed their clothes. Wearing only shorts under the robes, they waited.

The women returned, similarly clad in *Acadia* that reached to their knees. Kimi led the way to a separate building behind the main house. An anteroom contained a shelf and several woven baskets. Following Kimi's example, Chet and Merrill put their shoes and shorts in one of the baskets. Their robes drawn tightly about them, they entered the bathing area. A modest size pool was set into the tiled floor. No one else was about Kimi pointed to a row of stalls on one side of the room.

"Must wash first," she said.

The stalls were open on one side, but they provided some privacy. In each stall alongside the shower was a shelf with soap and a small towel. Chet used the towel as a washcloth to scrub his body, all but his hair. Hearing footsteps behind him, he turned to see the two women. They used the towels to cover their pubic hair and showed no embarrassment or haste as they crossed the tiled floor and slid into the pool. A moment later Merrill made a dash for the pool. He held the towel over his crotch and turned his back to the women before entering the water. Chet had planned to leave his robe at the edge of the pool, but he decided to follow their example. The women politely looked away as he slipped into the bath.

He sat next to Merrill on a ledge beneath the surface in water up to his shoulders. The women sat opposite them. Merrill started to cross to their side, but Kimi waved him off.

"No, Stahn-lee. Someone maybe come in."

Chet had seen no other guests. It seemed unlikely that anyone would join them, but he said nothing. He assumed Kimi was just being discreet. Public baths were common in Japan. Whether segregated or not; they were devoid of sexual significance. Was this all that Kimi had in mind when she agreed to go to Nikko? He wanted to believe it. Merrill's eyes were fixed on Kimi, watching her every move. Yoshi sat quietly with her eyes closed.

"I'm glad the water's warm," Merrill whispered, "or I'd be too embarrassed to get out."

Chet laughed. The women regarded them blankly.

"You shut eyes," Kimi ordered when it was time to go back. "Promise not look."

"I promise," Chet lied. Merrill said nothing.

The women left the pool as gracefully as they entered. Chet had only a glimpse of bare backs and buttocks before they donned their robes and went into the anteroom. He and Merrill retrieved their robes and joined them. On the walk back Merrill had a hand on Kimi's shoulder. She did not object; yet in the house she followed Yoshi into their room and slid the door shut.

Still clad in his shorts, Merrill walked back and forth from door to window. "What can be taking her so long?" he muttered at every turn.

"Maybe the bath was it," Chet said after ten minutes had elapsed.

"I was depending on Kimi to solve my problems, not add to them." He continued to pace the floor. "I've waited long enough!" he declared when several more minutes passed.

He donned his robe and produced two foil packets. "You may need this," he said, tossing one of them to Chet. "I'll see you in the morning."

It was Chet's turn to pace the floor, his hands thrust into his pants pockets. One hand fingered the rosary beads he had carried since he

was drafted, while the other hand rubbed the condom as if it were a worry stone. He had neglected to bring one himself. Not because he was confident that Kimi and Yoshi were decent women and free of disease, nor because he felt he would have no use for it. He had simply forgotten.

He hoped Kimi would rebuff Merrill. He was even prepared to defend her if called upon. He pictured himself wrestling with Merrill, while Kimi looked on. If he were the victor, would he do just what Merrill wanted, as in the movies? Was his desire to act as her guardian merely a sham? He shook his head vigorously to dispel that thought. He wanted only to hold her and feel the warmth of her body, as he had on the night of the dance. Maybe she would allow Merrill to do that much. He could forgive her for that.

He heard voices from next door, but was unable to make out the words. Stopping at the window, he looked out. Moonlight augmented the symmetry of the stone garden below. If only his life were equally serene and harmonious. Instead, his mind was a tangle of conflicting duties and loyalties -- to Kimi, Merrill, Denson, Helen, church, family, the army, the occupation. Like so many pebbles on the seashore, they shifted with every change of mood. He needed a steadfast beacon to light the way. His one goal, college, seemed at that moment irrelevant. He uttered a prayer that they were arguing next door and that Merrill would be sent back.

The sound of a door sliding made him turn. But it was Yoshi who stood in the doorway. She smiled shyly as she slid the door shut behind her. Without a word she dropped her robe and slipped under the quilt. The motion was as quick and graceful as when she entered the bath. She wore a white garment that came below her hips, a cross between a blouse and a slip.

Chet tried to adjust his thoughts to this new development. Yoshi's presence could only mean that Kimi was under the covers with Merrill. His prayers had gone unheeded. What made him think that Kimi wanted or needed protection? When they sang together, when she held his hand at the dance and sat on his lap in the truck, it meant only that she liked and trusted him. He recalled her joyful horseplay with Merrill at the beach and their tearful reunion at the hospital in Tokyo. Merrill was her true love. He had deluded himself in thinking she might love him.

Perhaps in recompense, he had been granted an opportunity to hold Yoshi in his arms. He liked Yoshi and enjoyed her company on their excursions, but he was put off by her stiffness and her limited knowledge of English. He felt he could learn more from Kimi, and she was far more responsive. But now it was Yoshi who seemed ready to teach and respond.

He unbuttoned his shirt, then stopped. By joining Yoshi, was he retaliating against God for failing to answer his prayer? He had his answer. Kimi was in love with Merrill. It wasn't the answer he wanted, but it gave him no license to bed any woman available. Yoshi was not just any woman. For months she had played an important role in his life, but he had given little or no thought to making love to her. He sought some justification now for joining her under the covers. All he had ever wanted from Kimi was to hold her warm body against him. Surely the same applied to Yoshi. God would not object to this small token of affection.

He removed his shirt and pants. Yoshi moved over to make room under the quilt. He lay down beside her and waited for her to come into his arms. When she did, he held her tightly and murmured her name

over and over. She was a bit stiff at first, but soon relaxed in his embrace.

“You like me a little?” she asked after some time had passed.

“I like you a lot,” he said.

It was no lie. For the moment Yoshi was his world. She pressed close to him, her arms shielding her breasts. He allowed his hands to caress her shoulders and upper back. Yoshi may have slept, but Chet had no desire to sleep. He wanted to hold her thus all night. He savored the warmth and the feel of her body against his. When his arm became numb from the weight of her head, he withdrew it carefully so as not to wake her.

Yoshi giggled.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“I think you sleep.”

“I think you sleep too.”

“I not sleep all night.”

Chet felt his heart swell. Was it possible that Yoshi might love him? He had heard that Japanese women regarded marriage and sex as the beginning, not the culmination, of love. He couldn’t picture himself married to Yoshi. He was due to go home in a week or two. Were the feelings she aroused in him mere fancy, a product of his imagination? Was he deceiving himself and her as well? Yet Yoshi knew he was due for discharge and must have taken it into account before coming to him. It wasn’t a question of marriage. It was a token of her affection. He was mulling this over in his mind when he heard Kimi’s voice from next door.

“No, Stahn-lee! You promise!”

Chet couldn’t make out the reply. Releasing Yoshi, he rolled over on his back. All was again quiet. He interpreted Kimi’s cry as a sign

that she had profited from his example. It might even mean that she loved him. He resolved anew to remain faithful to the affection he felt for her. He would hold Yoshi in his arms and be satisfied with that.

To his surprise she took his hand and placed it on her breast over the thin night garment she wore. With her other hand she gently combed his hair. "I no make promise," she said.

Chet stifled a sob. What was Yoshi thinking at that moment? His preference for Kimi, obvious even now, must hurt her. Were her words due to genuine affection, or was she seeking to confirm her own desirability by offering herself to him? He thought of the Shinto charm she had placed about his neck at the Meiji shrine, her quick action to save him from the MP at the beach, her efforts to speak better English. Perhaps Kimi was a fantasy, a dream, an ideal. Yoshi was real and present. He let himself fondle her breast, knowing very well where it might lead.

Then he stopped. Buttressed by his compromise simply to hold Yoshi, he had given no thought to the condom. His pants were well out of reach. His training and status as VD noncom demanded that he take precautions. He felt certain that Yoshi wasn't one to sleep with a number of different men. She might regard it as an insult, a reflection on her character; and by leaving her now, even for a minute, he risked breaking the spell. Yet he felt he had no choice. If Yoshi questioned his action, he could say it was merely a safeguard against pregnancy.

"I'll be right back," he said as he got up. Yoshi made no reply.

In his haste he thrust his hand into the wrong pocket. Feeling the rosary beads was like touching a live wire. Was making love to Yoshi more important than his Christian upbringing? He had fallen from grace once while half drunk, but he had redeemed himself at Shiga Heights. Now he was stone sober and had no excuse. Having assured

himself earlier that holding Yoshi in his arms was allowed, he satisfied his religious scruples by renewing his vow to do no more.

But what if Yoshi had other ideas? What if he weakened in his resolve? It would do no harm to be prepared. He reached into the other pocket. As his hand fastened on the condom, he heard a rap on the door. Was it Merrill? Had Kimi sent him away? Chet donned his pants and slid the door open a crack. The maid had come to collect the tea dishes. She averted her face, but he recognized her as a *hibakusha*, a one-sided beauty. Yoshi had hidden her head under the quilt. Motioning to the maid to wait in the hall, he gathered the dishes himself and handed them to her. She went off without a word.

Images of the hospital in Hiroshima and of Denson's burned body flashed through Chet's mind. He recalled the pledge he had made as he lowered the flag to half mast and saluted. If he made love to Yoshi now, he would not only alienate himself from God and ignore occupational policies; he would dishonor Denson's memory.

Strengthened in his resolve and relieved that he would have no need of a condom, he slid the door shut and returned to Yoshi. Poking her head out from under the quilt, she gave him a questioning look. He smiled reassuringly as he removed his pants and got under the covers. He held her close to him, his hands motionless, his ears alert to the stillness in both rooms. She lay quietly in his arms. In this way, he told himself, they could express their mutual affection. It seemed an acceptable compromise.

He shut his eyes, but a tumult of thoughts precluded sleep. Foremost in his mind was his pledge to honor his friend's memory. In reviewing the events that led to the suicide, he saw that Denson could neither accept nor dismiss Mrs. Kado's attitude toward the death of her sister and mother at Hiroshima. The fact that he owed his life to the

bomb and that the maid used her body to survive only added to his sense of guilt. But Chet saw it now as a matter of forgiveness. Mrs. Kado forgave those responsible for the deaths in her family, much as Japan seemed willing as a nation to forgive America for dropping the bomb. Unable to forgive himself and refusing to be forgiven, Denson had taken his own life. For Chet forgiveness was a principle of his faith. He would not make the same mistake as Denson.

The thought of Denson's liaison with the maid at the hotel raised yet another question in Chet's mind. Was he not taking advantage of Yoshi's vulnerability? What if she had left Kimi and Merrill alone out of politeness and was here now because she had no other choice? Was her initial stiffness a sign that her decision to come to him was not entirely voluntary? Did she feel some sense of obligation, like the women ordered by their government to comfort the American soldiers? Occupational policy seemed to regard all Japanese women as carriers of disease. He rejected that notion at once. Kimi and Yoshi were not prostitutes, and his feelings for them were not governed by orders or duty. He was free to make his own decisions. He wondered if Yoshi was equally free.

Since Kimi's sudden outcry, no sound had emanated from the next room. Chet assumed that Merrill was abiding by his promise not to do anything she didn't want. If Kimi had the will and the strength to resist Merrill's advances, perhaps for his sake, he would do no less for her. He had put his scruples to rest and was satisfied with his decision.

As he congratulated himself on his compromise, he became aware that his hands were caressing bare skin. While he was fumbling through his pockets and gathering up the tea dishes, Yoshi had removed her night garment. This could only mean that she had not come to him as a refugee or from any sense of duty. Even if she felt obliged to leave

Kimi and Merrill alone, she need not have come to him. Nothing had compelled her to get under the covers. She had acted of her own volition. She was there by choice. She saw him not as a soldier but as a man worthy of her love. All other loyalties and inhibitions were swept aside as his hand moved down her back and rested on her buttocks. Yoshi uttered a soft moan. Chet was aware only of his body's need to accept the gift she offered him. His last thought before yielding to that need was that he had no right to reject such a gift.

* * *

They rose too late to view the Kegon waterfall. It was several miles out of town, public transportation was unreliable, and they had a train to catch. When Kimi mentioned that the falls were linked to numerous suicides, Chet was secretly grateful for the reprieve. His mind was full of happy thoughts, and he didn't want to be reminded of the pledge he made following Denson's death. They spent the morning exploring the shops in Nikko and paid another visit to the sacred bridge. Chet stuck close to Yoshi. On several occasions he held her hand, and at one stall he bought her a silk scarf that had caught her eye.

"A farewell gift," he said when Merrill commented on his purchase.

They ate at an army canteen, smuggling food out to the women, then returned to the guest house to gather their belongings. While waiting for the train, they had little to say to each other. Each of them seemed lost in his or her private world. But on the ride to Tokyo, separated once again from the women, Merrill sought to evaluate the success of their mission. They had exchanged only a few deliberately vague comments that morning.

“Kimi wouldn’t take off her night clothes,” he said. “I got to feel her breasts and pat her ass, but I expected a lot more than that. How did you make out with Yoshi?”

Chet wanted to boast of his success; but Yoshi in her broken English had made him promise to keep their lovemaking a secret. She was afraid the word would spread in the laundry that she was an “easy woman.” To tell Merrill the truth would only increase that risk. Merrill had a number of buddies at the laundry, and he liked to talk. He might even use Chet’s success with Yoshi as leverage to advance his campaign to seduce Kimi. Although Chet had reconciled his decision to make love to Yoshi with his pledge to honor Denson’s memory, he was unable to rid himself of the feeling that he had betrayed his loyalty to Kimi. He refused to compound that betrayal by providing Merrill with more ammunition.

“Pretty much the same,” Chet said.

“That’s a bunch of crap!” Merrill said. “I watched you and Yoshi this morning. Your whole attitude toward her has changed. Tell me the truth. You made out with her, didn’t you?”

“We held each other, and I stroked her back. I’ve never slept with a woman before, so I was happy. Yoshi seemed to be happy too.”

Merrill eyed him with suspicion. “You’re not telling me everything.”

Chet produced the condom. “I’ll save this for next time,” he said.

“If there is a next time,” Merrill said. “I think Kimi went as far as she’s willing to go.”

“It proves what we’ve known all along. They’re both decent women.”

“Then why did they agree to spend the night with us?”

“They wanted to thank us for all we’ve done for them. Maybe it’s better this way.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We can go home with fond memories and no regrets.”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m willing to risk a few regrets.”

“Well, I’m satisfied with the way things turned out,” Chet said.

“Right,” Merrill said, “ but I still think you’re hiding something.”

Back in Camp Perry, Chet settled into his old routine in medical supply, with morning coffee at the Red Cross canteen and noonday visits to the quartermaster laundry. Bento had received his orders and was packing to go home. He gave no indication that he knew anything about Nikko, but he appeared to treat Chet with new respect. His changed attitude made Adam wonder what stories Merrill had spread in headquarters. He congratulated himself on his decision to keep his bond with Yoshi a secret.

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