

Chapter 1

In 1923, in a coastal town in the north west of Japan, in what is known as the Snow Country, a woman cried out in pain; a little whimper; not a scream. The tightly folded piece of cloth she was biting down on helped muffle the cry. Two of her neighbours were with her to help with the birth. And as the fires of the Great Kanto Earthquake raged and burned in Tokyo, Misao Murayama was born.

“Another girl, unfortunately,” said one neighbour as she handed the baby to its mother. “Better luck next time.”

Chapter 2

In the Willow Tea Rooms in Tokyo, Mother, the co-owner, was sipping tea when the first shock of what would later be called the Great Kanto Earthquake hit. It was just before lunch. She thought nothing of the shaking, as the surface of the amber mugicha rippled. They were used to tremors in Tokyo, but this one continued, and got stronger. Then she heard the creaking of wood against wood, and the scrape of the bottom of the scroll as it swayed across the wall behind her. Mother placed both hands on the table as the side to side waves combined with up and down ones. The tea in the cup sloshed against the sides now, and then the teacup fell to the floor. As Mother tried to stand she fell, too. Shocked, she grabbed the teapot and threw the water, tea leaves and all, on to the charcoal brazier to douse the embers. Then the shouts and screams and the crashes as hangings fell from the walls, vases toppled, screens fell. Other, louder crashes came from outside. The sliding door Mother crawled through fell on top of her, jostled from its frame by the powerful shocks.

Along with the maids, Mother sheltered under the stairs in the corridor. Then first shouts of "Fire" were heard. Cook emerged from her kitchen carrying a bucket of water. "All fires out in the kitchen, Mother," she said and wiped her brow leaving a black smudge across it. The shaking stopped.

The Tea Rooms were undamaged. They were safe. One of the maids had fallen down the stairs and hurt her ankle, but it was not broken, and apart from that and a few bruises all were well. Then the shaking started again. The women, all now gathered in the corridor around the stairs, held on to each other till it stopped. Cook went out the back through her kitchen. As soon as she returned Mother knew by the look on her face it was bad news.

"There are fires all around, Mother. We must go soon," said Cook.

Without hesitation Mother turned to the youngest maid and said, "Junko-chan, go upstairs, in big cupboard, and bring down all the big packing furoshiki. The rest of you get the best kimono and obi and bring them down here to pack. Cook, will you see to the kura? Miho-chan, you and I will see to my office."

They got the valuables together, as much as they could carry, and packed them in the huge squares of cloth, tying the corners to enable them to be slung over shoulders.

All the while Mother was thinking, the River or the Toyoda building, which? She reasoned that even if they made it to the river there was no guarantee they could get in a boat, and if the fires reached them they'd have to get into the water. If that happened all

the kimono and treasures they were carefully packing would be ruined. No, she decided they'd take a chance on the new Toyoda building. It was only a few weeks ago Toyoda-san himself was boasting to her how strong the eight storey concrete building was. How it had a double basement car park and storage area. How it could withstand anything.

"We will make for the Toyoda building. We can shelter there. Cook, you lead, I will follow. Stop for nothing," said mother.

Then they ran. Mother was the last to leave. She didn't even close the door. The flames were getting closer now and a plume of smoke rose up ahead from where the noodle shop had collapsed. They ran through the crowded streets. There was no real panic yet, just an orderly stream of goods and people heading either towards the Sumida River, or to the business district.

All of them reached the Toyoda building safely. They sheltered in the basement garage along with many others, while all around them the hundreds of small fires caused by the Great Kanto Earthquake joined up into one huge conflagration. They were lucky. They were alive and unhurt, and each woman had managed to carry off a furoshki full of the most valuable items they could find from the Tea Room cupboards.

In the dark basement it was Cook who kept up their spirits. They sang songs, and played games, and from nowhere she produced a huge split bamboo box of rice balls. "Well, the lunchtime rice was ready. No point in wasting it," she said to Mother.

With the help Toyoda-san, of one of her best customers, Mother got a bank loan, and the rebuilding of the Tea Rooms was in full swing within weeks. It seemed that all of Tokyo was under construction, and the sound of hammers never ceased. During the rebuilding, during what Cook called, 'the time of sawdust', there was little for Mother to do in Tokyo. So she went to Kyoto, where all was quiet elegance, to visit an old friend. It was through this friend that Mother met Emiko, a retired geisha whose patron had died recently leaving her well provided for financially, but bored. The two women were like a turtle and the moon, to use the old Japanese idiom.

Emiko, the beautiful geisha who knew nothing of commerce, but could keep a roomful of men entranced by her stories, had studied dance, the tea ceremony and ikebana and, of course, she had that soft, lisping Gion accent. She'd been brought up to be a geisha from the age of four and knew no other world. Now in her mid thirties she felt she had little but retirement or teaching to look forward to and dreaded the long, uneventful years ahead.

Mother, also brought up in the business, but on the catering side, was a hard-nosed businesswoman - or so she liked to think of herself. With Cook she had built up a successful Tea House. Now a building site, but she had confidence they'd pay off the bank loan, and succeed again.

The addition of Emiko would bring a dash of old-world Kyoto glamour to the Tea Rooms. And the input of money from the sale of Emiko's house would knock years off the loan repayments. Cook agreed. And so it was that as the leaves surrendered themselves to autumn and carpeted Kyoto in yellows and reds, Mother returned from her

holiday with Emiko.

Word soon got around, and even before the Tea House opened Emiko was holding dinners in the large western-styled hotels that had survived the earthquake. After all was not every day you could attend a party and meet in the flesh one of the geisha who featured in the “Beauties of Gion” calendar.

In return for her cash Mother formally adopted Emiko who would, in time, inherit the Tea Rooms.

Chapter 3

1928, in a small village nestled in a valley not far from the town where five years ago Misao Murayama was born, a small boy called Toshihiko Yamazaki woke up. He rolled over and propped up the window to let in some air. A warm breeze wafted into the loft space. He got up quickly and rushed down the steep stairs to the main room where his mother, father and younger brother slept. His mother opened her eyes and said, “Toshi, you are up so early. Let out the chickens. Quietly now. Let your father and Kazuyoshi sleep a little longer.”

“Yes, Mother. Can I walk all the way? Can I walk all the way to town?”

“It is too far for you to walk all the way, but you can walk part of the way there.”

“But I’m five, Mother. I’m a big boy now. Too big to sit on the cart with the eggs and pickles.”

“Yes, you are a big boy, but you must remember that this is Kazuyoshi’s first time to go to town. You must take care of him.”

“I will Mother,” said Toshi as he ran to the genkan, stepped down onto the hard packed earth, and gently slid the door open trying his best to make it creak as little as possible. Already the sun was beating down. He let out the chickens to peck and scratch in his Mother’s vegetable garden, and looked across to the hills opposite, watching the morning mist roll up their sides. Soon, we will be there, and even further, he thought. Soon we’ll be in the town and at the summer festival, and I can see all the stalls and people and perhaps father will buy us something. And as he thought this he checked under the house where tools and baskets were kept. His hand touched his shrimping net that he had brought back from the summer festival last year. It was still there where he’d left it a few days ago. Apart from his wooden sword, it was his most treasured possession. He ran round the house to check the chickens, then inside hoping to find everyone ready to eat breakfast. The quicker they finished breakfast, the quicker they could leave.

Finally, after what had seemed like hours to Toshi, they set off for the village shrine where the ox cart was waiting. Toshi skipped and ran ahead, Mother had Kazuyoshi strapped to her back, and Father was carrying a large basket of edamame with a smaller basket of eggs balanced on top. When they reached the shrine Mother took both baskets and placed them carefully next to a basket of cabbages and a huge jar of pickles. Then she went and sat beside Asami-san who asked to hold Kazuyoshi while mother checked her eggs were placed safely on the cart. Father went over to old Miyakawa, who looked

after the ox. Hasegawa-sensei, the village schoolteacher, was also there in the classroom which was part of the shrine. Toshi walked over and said, "Good morning Sensei."

"Good morning Toshi-kun. Are you all ready for the summer festival?"

"Oh, yes, Sensei. It is so exciting."

"Yes. It is my first time to go to the festival."

"Really, Sensei? Do they not have summer festivals in Tokyo?"

"Yes, they do, but this is the first time for me to see a traditional country festival. I am looking forward to it immensely."

"Oh, you will enjoy it, Sensei. There are so many people, people everywhere. And so much noise, and stalls selling food and toys and so many things. You have to be careful not to get lost. But don't worry, it is quite easy really because the beach is on one side, and the pines on the other, so as long as you stay on the wide stone path, you cannot get too lost."

"Well, thank you for telling me that. Ah, here is Masako-chan and her father. I think we are all here now, so perhaps we will be setting off soon. Shall I lift you up on to the cart?"

"Oh, no Sensei. I am walking with the men. I'm five now."

"Five, really. You'll be starting school this year then."

"Yes, Sensei. After harvest. I will try to be a good pupil," said Toshi as he bowed.

"I'm sure you will do well."

Masako's father was pushing a basket of cabbages onto the cart, and then he lifted Masako, and placed her beside them. Masako shouted to Toshi, "To-chan, To-chan, do you want to come and sit beside me?"

"No, Ma-chan. I'm walking with the men," said Toshi striding forward towards the front of the cart where Miyakawa was checking the ox harness.

Masako was Toshi's best friend. They were the same age, and lived just one rice paddy apart. Toshi and Masako's mother had been friends since childhood, and since Masako's mother died, Toshi's mother had taken over a lot of the housework in their house. The two families had become even closer.

Kazuyoshi, now fast asleep again, was laid gently next to the edamame. Masako's father said, "Take care he doesn't bump his head against anything, Ma-chan."

Miyakawa turned to Hasegawa-sensei and bowed, "Sensei, we are ready to leave. Would you would like to take a seat? I recommend leaning your back against the cabbages."

"I thought I'd walk, Miyakawa-san."

"Oh, Sensei what will people think of me if I allow our schoolteacher to walk. Please, at least as we climb the hill."

So, Hasegawa-sensei took a seat on the cart with his back next to the cabbages, and they set off uphill.

He looked back at Asami-san talking to Toshi's mother, and wished he could change places. Perhaps once we've climbed the hill, Asami-san will get on the cart, he hoped. In the meantime he looked around at the green hills, and the blue sky above them,

remembering the last time he had been on this cart. It had been just under a year ago. Another hot, sunny day just like today, when he had first arrived to take up the job of teacher to replace Asami's grandfather, who at eighty, and almost blind was retiring. With the swaying of the cart, the pine wood smell, the hum of the insects, soon Hasegawa felt his eyelids grow heavy as he remembered back to that day. He felt his cheeks blush with shame.

Hasegawa had come to the village from Tokyo. He had longed to continue his studies, but knew that without money it was impossible. So he had tried for positions as tutor to the children of wealthy families in Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. Planning to save his salary and, after a few years, resume his studies. But without connections to recommend him he got nowhere. It was only when faced with the prospect of not being able to pay his rent, that he accepted the post of sole teacher at an out-of-the-way village he'd never heard of, in a part of Japan that he didn't know.

He travelled north on the train from Tokyo with a sense of despair. Would he ever be able to return to his Shakespeare. Now all were clamouring to learn German, to be engineers. English and English literature was despised. But not by Hasegawa, with his head full of the Sonnets, and his more recent discovery of the Lake Poets. If only he had money, or a rich patron. He saw himself travelling to England in a long, black cloak. Of touring round the country moody and alone and writing, always writing. Writing his thoughts, writing poetry, and sketching what he saw. Then returning to Japan with enough material for books that would be so well received that universities would flock to offer him a position. Of his growing old in libraries, surrounded by books, and students who'd come to study under him. But all that vanished as soon as he opened his eyes. The salary in his new job was so low that he'd be unable to save anything at all.

As the train travelled north his prospects of continuing his studies seemed to recede into the distance. This was his state of mind as he got off the train at the town nearest to the village. His gloom deepened even further when he was told that the village itself was a long walk away over the hill, and there was no public transport. The station master took pity on him and told him he was in luck. It was market day, and some of the villagers were in town to sell their surplus. The station master was sure they'd help him with his luggage, and he took Hasegawa round to the marketplace and introduced him. The villagers were delighted to meet him, and assured him that he and his luggage could travel to the village on the ox cart as soon as they'd sold their eggs and pickles. In the meantime the villagers insisted he share their meal of rice balls. In his helplessness and embarrassment he returned this kindness with a superior demeanour and surly manners. But this did nothing to change the good humour of the villagers and their genuine welcome of their new teacher. As he ate their delicious rice balls filled with he knew not what, Hasegawa thought the scene he was in was so antiquated that it could have been drawn by Hokusai. He seemed to have arrived in another world.

So Hasegawa entered the village on the ox cart. As they came over the top of the hill he thought he was seeing things. The farmhouses moved; the walls seemed to be alive.

Sitting on the cart he rubbed his eyes, but still the walls moved. It was only when they got closer that he could see that the movement was caused by the strings of vegetables and fish hanging from the low eaves, twirling and swaying in the breeze. One of the women saw his stare and told him that the vegetables would be pickled and the fish kept for the winter months.

He stayed in the house of the old schoolmaster, who had recently retired. The old schoolmaster could see Hasegawa's unhappiness, and recalled his own arrival in the village over fifty years ago. And how he, too, had intended to leave as soon as he could, but here he was still, a happy man, and part of village life. He knew his life had been blessed in so many ways that he felt quite unworthy. He also knew that Hasegawa would either leave after his first year, or else end up like him.

It was not until six months later, when the old schoolmaster died, that Hasegawa first considered staying on another year. The whole village turned out for the funeral, and even some from the neighbouring village came. All work stopped, the school closed, and everyone gathered in the temple as stories were told of the past. Stories in which the old schoolmaster played a leading part. Some were funny, others sad, and through them all radiated the deep love and respect the villagers felt for the old man who had come to them a young man from a city far away. It seemed he'd helped every family at one time or another. During one good year the village had diversified into silkworm culture, in another chickens were bought to lay eggs and kept under the houses. The eggs were eaten by the villagers in good times and sold in bad. The houses themselves were repaired. And, in a particularly good year, they teamed up with a neighbouring village to buy their own ox to be shared and looked after by the two villages. When not used for ploughing this ox was harnessed to a cart, and once a week the surplus eggs, vegetables and pickles were taken to the local town to be sold at the market. All this was done on the advice of the old schoolmaster.

At the funeral the sake flowed, and the laughter got louder. Hasegawa felt emboldened to ask one old farmer how it was he got on so well with the old schoolmaster when, as the Japanese saying goes, they were as different as the moon and a turtle.

"Well I'll tell you what it was," said the wrinkled old farmer. "These clever people, no matter who they are and what they do, always end up trying to tell me something about farming. Now I would never presume to tell them something about books, even though I have read one all the way through. They've never spent a day doubled over up to their thighs in mud planting rice, but they always seem to know a better way to do it. The schoolmaster never once tried to tell me how to plant my rice. He did help me read a book once, though, and a very good book it was, too. About chickens, it was. A wonderful book, and I've kept it all these years. It's just the right size to wedge the back window open."

Recently the villagers had started to ask Hasegawa for advice. And the aloof, penniless, Tokyo scholar found himself at the centre of village life, looked up to and respected by all. Slowly he changed. He thought twice before he spoke, and his earlier flippancy vanished as he realised that his advice, if taken, could change lives. The more

the villagers respected him, the humbler he became, and the stronger his admiration grew for them. And there was Asami. Asami had returned for the funeral of her grandfather, and as her grandmother was now in her seventies, she was to stay and look after the house. So Asami, her grandmother and Hasegawa had been living in the same house for the past few months.

All the village could see the change in Hasegawa, and the way Asami looked at him. All believed it was just a matter of time before they married. It was so clear, really, so clear to all. All except Hasegawa. Before Asami arrived Hasegawa had thought of staying on another year, perhaps, just one more year, but he wasn't sure, and he hadn't really decided. Since the arrival of Asami, not once did Hasegawa consider leaving.

As they approached the top of the hill, Hasegawa looked back to Asami and Toshi's mother. How could he leave? He sighed, and was sure he could taste the sea in the air. Masako and Kazuyoshi were both fast asleep. Little Toshi, visibly tiring from the walk up the steep hill had dropped back to walk beside his mother.

Glancing down at her son she said, "To-chan, you will be too tired to enjoy yourself if you walk much further. Why not get up on the cart and have a rest?"

"I'm fine, Mother, really. Not tired at all," he said out of breath.

Hasegawa saw and heard all this. Then as they reached the top of the hill he said, "My, Toshi-kun, you are strong. You have walked all the way to the top. I wonder if you could do me a favour?"

"Of course, Sensei."

"Well, you see, my legs have gone to sleep, so I really would like to get off and walk for a while. But someone strong must sit and lean against these cabbages. I don't want to wake Masako, and I'm not sure she's strong enough anyway. Do you think you could sit up here and press your back against the cabbages for me? You would be doing me a great favour."

"Of course, Sensei. I can sit in the place you are sitting."

"Come on then. I'll lift you up."

So Toshi took Hasegawa's place on the cart. Hasegawa jumped down and waited for the two women. As they reached him, Toshi's mother whispered, "Thank you, Sensei."

"Can you taste the sea?" he asked them as they started going downhill. A little later Toshi's mother declared she was tired and sat on the cart next to Toshi, who was now fast asleep with one arm over the basket of cabbages. This left Hasegawa and Asami walking on their own. Hasegawa tried, but could not think of a single thing to say. He glanced across at her. A slight sheen of perspiration showed on her forehead and upper lip. Her cheeks were still flushed from the climb. Flushed like a rose, a red, red, rose. Just like in the Scottish poem. Without thinking, and in English, Hasegawa said,

"O my love is like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June.
O my love is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune."

Asami turned to him, "What did you say, Sensei?"

Flustered, he replied, “Oh it’s nothing, Asami, nothing at all. Just part of a poem.”

“A poem in Foreign, like the ones in your books? Please say it again.”

So Hasegawa did, but felt foolish.

“What does it mean in Japanese, Sensei?” asked Asami.

Feeling even more foolish Hasegawa translated it, looking down at the dirt road as he did so, and wishing it would swallow him up.

“Why, that was lovely, Sensei. So romantic. It must be wonderful to understand foreigners.”

On they walked, mainly downhill now. The early morning mist had vanished, and the insects and birds filled the silence with their song. Hasegawa was content to walk beside Asami all day. Just to be beside her, forever, to walk though life like this. But all too soon he could see the town as they rounded a bend. This magical walk would end, and they would be back in the real world. The world where he was a penniless teacher with no prospects, and she was a beautiful, dutiful young girl, with the whole world at her feet.

When they arrived at the shrine there were already crowds milling about. Toshi could see the huge, sloping tiled roof at the end of the long paved path. A path filled with people, and each side of the path lined with stalls. The ox was unhitched, and old Miyakawa led him off while the villagers spread out their vegetables, eggs and pickles for sale. The cart made this journey once a week in normal times, but during the summer festival it came every day with a different group from the village. It was a holiday for them, the children and men joined in, and the prudent villagers made sure they had something to sell. Toshi and Masako were wide eyed and excited, but knew nothing would happen until the stall was ready for business, so they did what little they could to help speed up the process. They fetched water from the well, both of them carrying the bucket back as it was too heavy for one.

Delicious smells were everywhere, even at this early hour. Finally everything was ready, but still they could not go.

“Each of you have a rice ball first,” insisted Toshi’s mother. So they did. Then they were off, with strict instructions not to get lost. They decided to walk up one side then they would walk back the other side. Toshi and Masako with Masako’s father and Toshi’s father carrying Kazuyoshi on his shoulders set off through the crowd. Toshi envied Kazuyoshi as he could see more. All Toshi could see was the small patch in front. Now they were in the crowd the noise was even louder. Each stallholder tried to outdo the next one proclaiming the cheapness and quality of their wares. And the smells, smells Toshi identified as “festival smells”, the burnt caramel smell of cotton candy, the mouthwateringly delicious smells of the various skewered chicken and fish stands, roasted, dried squid, marinated salmon, steamed buns. Wave after wave of delicious smells entered his nose. He breathed in slowly to savour each one, knowing that he would be unlikely to taste any of them.

They came to the half-way mark where there was a sort of crossroads with a paved

path leading off to a subsidiary shrine on the beach. There was more open space here. Suddenly there was a scream as next to where Masako and Toshi were standing a small girl came running from the pines, tripped on the edge of the paving slabs and landed face down. Out of the corner of his eye Toshi noticed a bigger boy with a stick in his hand further back in the pines. The little girl got up, and when Toshi looked again the boy with the stick had vanished. The girl sat on the edge of the paving slab holding her knee which was bleeding. Tears were on her cheeks but she didn't make a sound.

"Here, let me see," said Masako's father as he bent down to look at the girl's knee. Toshi's father put down Kazuyoshi and went over to the well, dipped his handkerchief into the water then walked back and wiped the blood and dirt from her knee. All this time the girl said nothing, but the tears had stopped.

"Where are your parents?" Toshi's father asked.

She pointed towards the shore where there was a group of ramshackle-looking houses, but said nothing.

Putting the now dirty handkerchief away, Toshi's father said to her, "Well, you'd best get home to your Mummy."

The girl still said nothing, but looked at them, and wiped the tears off her face leaving a dirty smear across it.

Toshi's father turned to Kazuyoshi, "Come on Ka-kun, you can walk a little, till we get into the crowds again."

And off they went. As they entered the crowd again Toshi glanced back. The girl was still sitting there.

They reached the shrine, made an offering and said their prayers. There was a cotton candy stall and Toshi's father bought a huge ball of cotton candy on a stick, it was the size of a watermelon. He handed it to Toshi. Toshi knew he'd have to share it with Kazuyoshi and Masako, but he didn't mind. They sat in the sun on the shrine steps and Toshi made a start on his cotton candy. After a while Toshi's father said, "Well, let's make our way back to the others. Your mother will have a bento for us."

Toshi passed the candy to Kazuyoshi, "Here, Ka-kun, your turn."

Kazuyoshi grabbed the stick and shouted, "My turn, my turn, next Ma-chan's turn."

They made their way slowly back, it was even more crowded now. By the time they reached the crossroads Masako was eating the cotton candy. The little girl with the bloody knee was still there where they'd left her, sitting on the kerb and poking the sand with a stick. The blood had run part way down her leg, but was dried now. Toshi took a good look at her. She was dirty. Her hair looked like it hadn't been combed. Her cotton kimono had a hole at the shoulder. Masako stopped beside Toshi. She walked over to the girl and handed her the cotton candy, the ball was about the size of an apple now, and said, "Here, you can have this."

The girl looked up and took the candy without a word or smile.

Masako said, "I'm Masako, and this is Toshi-kun."

"Misao," said the girl and pushed all of the cotton candy into her mouth with both hands, then she looked up and smiled.

Masako's father shouted over, "Come on, you two, I'm hungry."

So hand in hand Toshi and Masako left Miso licking the sticky sugar off her fingers and poking the sand with her stick.

Misao looked at Toshi and Masako as they disappeared into the crowd and thought how wonderful it must feel to have a father like that. A father who would pick you up when you fell over. One who didn't mind dirtying his handkerchief to wipe your scraped knee. One who believed that if Misao rushed home to show her mother her knee, her mother would actually care, and do something. She tried to imagine what it would be like to have a mother like that, but couldn't. Misao knew better than to go home and show her mother her knee. If she did, and her mother was in she'd be lucky to get off with just a slap. If her father was in it would mean he had no work, or was sleeping off one of his sessions. If she disturbed him, it would be more than just a slap. No, she'd be better off just sitting here quietly, out of the way.

So little Misao stayed where she was drawing pictures in the sand with her stick. She knew by now that Ryuuta, the boy who had been chasing her, had probably found someone else to bully, or had gone home for lunch. She licked her lips and fingers again getting the last of the sugary taste. How wonderful it must be to be able to give away cotton candy.

Misao didn't go home until it started to get dark, and even then she hesitated to slide open the door until she heard her mother's voice. Then she heard another voice, a voice she didn't recognise, a woman's voice.

"Ah, here's my little Misao-chan," said Misao's father with a smile that she rarely saw, and when seen was never for her. He signalled her to come to him.

She made her way across the dirty room as terrified of this "kind" father as she was of the normal one. The stranger, an old woman in a dark brown kimono, stared at her as she passed.

"Small for her age, isn't she?" the woman said.

By this time Misao had reached her father. As he put his arm around her Misao flinched. It felt so strange.

"But my little Misao is a strong girl," her father said patting her on the shoulder, and continued, "Oh, I will miss her. I'm not sure we can part with her for such a small sum."

Misao looked at him. He was still holding her, and had a strange look in his eyes, not angry, but not happy. Misao was confused, and wanted to move away, but he held her so tightly.

The old woman lifted her teacup, drank then put it down and said, "Yes, I understand. Well in that case I will leave you. So sorry to have disturbed you."

She started to get up. At this Misao's father let her go, leaned across the table and said, "No, no, don't go. I accept, I accept."

"Well, if you are sure," said the old woman. From between her kimono and obi she withdrew a small cloth wallet. She took out something wrapped in white paper and passed it to her father and said, "Here you are, as agreed."

Her father took the paper, held it close and opened it below the level of the table. Misao could see it contained money. He pushed it into his kimono and bowed to the old woman.

Misao's mother said, "I'll go and get her things."

"What things?" her father said, "She doesn't need anything." Then he looked across at the old woman and said, "All the less for you to carry, neh," and smiled the smile Misao had seen a few times before when the landlord visited.

The old woman said, "As you wish." She turned to Misao and said, "Well we'd better be going if we are to catch the train to Niigata."

She took Misao's hand and went to the genkan where she put on her shoes. Misao stood there in her bare feet not knowing what to do.

"No sandals, have you?"

Misao shook her head.

"Never mind. Come along then. Keep a tight hold of my hand, now."

And they walked out of the house Misao thought of as home. No one had said goodbye. She glanced back as the old woman slid the door shut. Her father was looking at the money, and her mother was breastfeeding her baby brother. The clink of dishes meant that Misao's older sister was in the kitchen. Misao had had nothing to eat all day except the cotton candy, but she didn't feel hungry. She was frightened. She was trying to understand what had just happened, and trying to keep up with the old woman who walked so quickly through the dark night.