

BECOMING HIBAKUSHA:  
TALES OF SHAME, PRIDE, LOVE AND LOSS

HONORS THESIS

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by

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## ABSTRACT

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December, 2018

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“Becoming Hibakusha” is a compilation of short stories about *hibakusha* experiences in Hiroshima after World War II. *Hibakusha* is the Japanese term for the “survivors of the bomb” and thus, they exist as an ostracized segment of Japanese society. Dedicated to examining the contentious and oftentimes ambiguous position hibakusha filled in Japanese society after the war and the horrific suffering inflicted by humanity’s first use of nuclear weapons, “Becoming Hibakusha” explores the lives of Ito Katsu, a major in the 2<sup>nd</sup> General Army, Tanaka Isamu, a newspaper journalist in the 1960s, and Watanabe Ichiko, a music store manager in the 1960s, whose lives have all been irrevocably diverted due to the dropping of the bomb in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Despite incomprehensible tragedy, incessant health issues, and an uncertain status in Japanese society, each character struggles to eke out an existence worthy of living. Katsu finds solace and pride in sharing his experiences, while Isamu and Ichiko find acceptance and a place to call home in each other’s love.

## **Thanks**

I want to start this piece off by giving thanks to the many people in my social network who helped contribute to this project's success. Without their influences and contributions, this thesis would not be what it is today, and as such, they are deserving of praise and recognition. First off, my loving parents, Wayne and Jodie Brockinton, have poured their heart and souls into me for the past twenty three years and, while we don't always see eye to eye and I have undoubtedly caused them much grief and heartache (not to mention the stress-induced greying of hair), they have always been supportive of me and my ambitions. Without my Dad's constant proofreading and revision of each story and the philosophical discussions between me and my Mom, these short stories would lack the refined depth that they now possess.

My best friends, Cris Narvaez, Freddie Bautista, and Josh Brockinton are also deserving of recognition. Cris Narvaez has done a phenomenal job of guiding my exploration into anime, and as such, recommended many shows to me throughout this past semester whose influences can be felt throughout my thesis, whether it be in the naming of characters or the inspiration for certain scenes and symbolism. Freddie Bautista and Josh Brockinton, while often being more distractions than anything else, served as sounding boards for the viability of my ideas and they provided feedback that helped to guide me to the final implementation of those ideas.

Of course, my thesis supervisor and second reader, Dr. Peter Siegenthaler and Professor Stephanie Noll, have been instrumental to this project's success, as well. Dr. Siegenthaler was crucial to ensuring the accuracy of my portrayal of a Japanese society

which I have never experienced myself and had not done extensive research on before the beginning of this thesis. I may have bitten off more than I could chew with this creative research project, but Dr. Siegenthaler helped guide me through the treacherous waters of cultural appropriation, helping to ensure that I remained true to these peoples' genuine experiences and didn't reduce their personalities to shallow stereotypes or my western interpretations of their actions. Additionally, Professor Noll was invaluable in refining the quality of my writing and helping to ensure that the fusion of Japanese terms and ideas into a story intended for a western audience seamlessly flowed and made sense. Two of the biggest challenges were introducing Japanese terms and providing the context clues that were necessary for the reader to glean understanding without explicitly providing a definition and also ensuring that my writing didn't fall into a colloquially western tone, which was often the case. Professor Noll was extremely helpful in bringing those sorts of faults to my attention.

Throughout the past four years of my college education, I have also had the privilege of taking courses with some pretty amazing professors who have done a lot to help shape me and this thesis into what we are today. Dr. Kathryn Ledbetter was influential in introducing me to feminist critical theory, and as such, her influence was what prompted me to want to write Ichiko and Isamu's love story as equals, with each chapter switching between points of view to ensure an even balance and focus on each protagonist. The many conversations I had with Dr. David Cameron in the spring semester of 2018 helped me to refine and focus on two of my biggest symbols in the novel, the buck and doe. Dr. Bob Price's Honors course, *The Future of Work*, and the many conversations we've subsequently had throughout this semester have been

thoroughly encouraging and consequential to my ideological outlooks, which is the framework from which the story was constructed.

Professor Jennifer duBois's focus on point of view in my second creative writing workshop course helped me to remain cognizant of those issues as I wrote these short stories, especially in the third and fourth story where I wrote chapters one and two of my novel and was forced to depict the same scene twice from two differing perspectives. Professor Anne Winchel's wonderful Storytelling in Video Games courses were helpful in teaching me how to build a compelling narrative with intriguing protagonists and characters. Bill Posten's Honors leadership course provided an interesting opportunity for me to experience and wrestle with the foil of my own ideological beliefs (nihilism vs. whatever the opposite of nihilism is, which is very evidently what Bill Posten believes in). While neither philosophy is provable, being able to learn about people's varying viewpoints, especially those viewpoints that radically differ from your own, was interesting and beneficial to my growth as a person. Dr. Nyri Bakkalian and Daniela Freeman were also both very helpful in providing encouragement and direction in the project's early stages. Throughout this process I have undoubtedly left out some people who have influenced me throughout these past four years, but the ones that I enumerated were the biggest influences and my favorite professors/people who have positively impacted me and made this thesis possible. So thank you all for your hard work and willingness to invest in my growth and potential.

## **Explanation of the Structure of my Thesis**

Originally, my plan for this thesis was to write a novel about the experiences of hibakusha and *burakumin* (a historically ostracized social caste) in Japan in the 1960s, taking Ichiko and Isamu from their meeting all the way to their tragic end. As time elapsed and the prospective size of that undertaking began to dawn on me, I decided to downsize the scope of the project so I could focus more on the research and ensuring that my portrayal of Japanese society was accurate. This downsized project ended up comprising four short stories and one overarching piece that describes my processes, methodologies, symbolism, and inspiration, which you are reading right now.

The short stories are as follows: Becoming Hibakusha was the first creative piece that I wrote in Professor Noll's Preserving Humanities during Wartime Honors course. This short story is only related to the others through theme and subject matter. There is no overlap of characters or plot. My second short story, You are Going to Die, is a prequel to the novel that I was originally wanting to write. The third short story is Chapter One of that novel and is from Isamu's perspective. The fourth short story is Chapter Two of the novel and takes Ichiko through that same day.

## **Methodology**

My research on this topic began in Dr. Galloway's Intro Thesis course that helped me refine my thesis idea and set myself up for success in this semester. When I started research for this thesis, and didn't have any idea really what I wanted to do with this topic, I began by checking out every book available in Alkek that dealt with the subjects of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the dropping of the bombs. The most notable of those titles



were *Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Physical, Medical, and Social Effects of the Atomic Bombings*, *The Bells of Nagasaki*, *The Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan*, and *When the Empire Comes Home: Repatriation and Reintegration in Postwar Japan*.

I finally settled on my novel idea after reading Kenzaburo Oe's *Hiroshima Notes*, where I learned about the true story of a hibakusha who fell in love with a music store clerk and then died of leukemia. Shortly afterward, his partner, the music store clerk, committed suicide. James Orr's *The Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* and Ran Zwigenberg's *Hiroshima: The Origins of Global Memory Culture* were both very good books that I read over the summer. They provided a good overview of the ironic plight of hibakusha and inspired many ideas.

Unfortunately, however, most of the ideas did not make it into the thesis and will only be realized in the novel's final form. I also used the interlibrary loan system to check out David Lewis's *Religion in Japanese Daily Life*, which again provided me with many good ideas regarding their spirituality and interpretations of death. However, most of the information provided would only be useful later in the novel.

When it came time to actually sit down and write the stories, the majority of the research that I did was on the spot. I would begin writing and be confronted by a scene or phenomenon which I wasn't entirely familiar with, at which point I would turn to Google, YouTube, or the Alkek library databases in that order. While Google and YouTube lack the academic rigor of peer-reviewed sources available in the Alkek databases, it is precisely for that reason that I relied upon them, as opposed to the stiff academic journals and books. The sources I was able to find off of Google and YouTube were designed to

be consumed by the average individual, and as such, explained things at such a basic level that anyone, regardless of previous experience with Japanese culture or people, could understand and grasp the concepts. Additionally, Google and YouTube's search engines often brought back sources that were much more pertinent to my explorations than the Alkek databases would.

Another interesting aspect of this creative process was in how I would prepare to write each story. I began by brainstorming the intro and deciding where I wanted the story to pick up. I would ask myself, "In what moment do I want the audience to first meet the protagonist?" Once I had answered that question, I would begin writing, thus doing very little in the way of preparation. Despite all conventional wisdom and what I had been taught about how to build a compelling narrative (i.e., brainstorm your beginning, middle, and end and have it all neatly laid out before you start writing), I uncovered each story in the moments of creation. While I surely had a hand in their creation, it seemed to me as if the characters unveiled themselves and their actions to me as time progressed and I pressed them for their input. It was a bit disconcerting to write the stories without a solidified outline guiding my writing. However, at the same time, it was also liberating. I merely followed Katsu, Isamu, and Ichiko through their respective experiences and did my part in telling their stories.

### **Author's Note**

In the next few pages, I will talk about each story and the symbolism that I intentionally wove through the stories, what it meant for me, and the sort of things that inspired me to write the stories the way I did. However, I would be remiss in my duties as

an author if I failed to point out this one crucial element: As I learned from Dr. Ledbetter early on in my college career, authorial intent is complete and utter bullshit. Even though I can go through my memory and talk about these stories and my thoughts of what I intended them to mean when I wrote them, in the end it doesn't matter because the human mind is so complex and is assailed by the unknowable forces of the unconscious that we can't even really explain the phenomena that occur and therefore all attempts of explanation on authorial intent fall short of the truth, even when they come from the author themselves. Creative works are distinct products of the moment of their birth, and after that moment of creation has passed it is impossible to access that same set of influences that guided its creation.

However, that is not to say that any explanation of meaning in creative works is pointless and devoid of meaning. What truly matters after being impacted by a creative work is what the individual audience member takes away from it. If you read my stories and then read my explanation of the symbolism and what I had intended it to mean, and our interpretations differ, your interpretation is no less valid than mine. If they happen to overlap, I will be overjoyed, but if they don't, defer to your judgement and not mine. Now, with that out of the way, if you are reading this part of the thesis first (as would make sense since this exposition precedes the short stories), please, stop reading here and read the short stories first. I don't want my interpretations of symbolism and meaning to color all the wonderful possibilities of interpretation that could be gleaned from my stories.

### **Symbolism, Meaning and Inspiration: Becoming Hibakusha**

As previously mentioned, this is the short story that began it all. At the end of Professor Noll's Preserving Humanities During Wartime course, we were tasked with completing a research-based creative project and I decided to focus on the Japanese experience in Hiroshima. I did some research into Japan's radicalism which led to their use of "kamikaze" pilots and their preference for death over surrender. Additionally, I had watched a YouTube testimonial from a hibakusha who gave her firsthand accounts of the horrors she witnessed directly after the explosion. It is from that testimonial that I drew most of my inspiration for all the scenes that depict the horrors of nuclear warfare, both in the first and second short stories.

When I rewrote this story for the thesis (took the three-page short that I had submitted for the Honors course and expanded it), I had been re-watching *Attack on Titan*, which depicts a world overrun by giants who viciously devour humans and have forced them to the brink of extinction. While the giants can be seen as analogous to atomic weaponry (in fact, later on in the series it is revealed that the giants were a man-made threat utilized to force everyone into one centralized area with one centralized goal: survival), *Attack on Titan*'s influence can be felt throughout the story, either on a subconscious or conscious level. When Jun expresses the sentiment that "those not willing to risk anything can never affect change," he is mirroring the statement Armin makes to Jean in the forest as they are carrying out the operation to catch Annie in her titan form.

In the revisions, the two biggest issue areas that Dr. Siegenthaler pointed out to me were in the unlikely abundance of resources during the war and my expression of my

characters' emotions. Originally, when Katsu was training his "battalion," they all had rifles and plenty of ammunition to be able to waste on target practice. There were also multiple surgeons working to save Yamamoto's life and plenty of medical supplies to do so. However, the setting is the end of World War Two in Japan, which had already depleted most of its supplies and manpower and was thus relying upon children to defend its homeland. In terms of my expression of emotions, when Jun and Katsu have their debates over the ethicality of their actions (arming children and the subsequent accident with Yamamoto being shot) and when Kobayashi deals with his emotions regarding his actions, I had originally expressed those emotions as guilt, which is my western framing of that emotion. While I do believe that in both situations the feeling of "guilt" would be present, the characters would not use "guilt" to describe their emotions, as guilt has to do with the moral standing of an individual, a distinctly western ideal. Rather, these characters would have been more concerned with the shame they felt at failing to perform their duty to their community, the nation of Japan, and the Emperor.

### **Symbolism, Meaning and Inspiration: You are Going to Die**

This short story began in Dr. Galloway's Intro Thesis course as part of her end of the year requirement that we write our first chapter. At the time, I wasn't feeling up to writing the first chapter of my novel, as I was still concerned with the issues of cultural appropriation and ensuring that I accurately portrayed my protagonists' experiences. As such, I decided to write a prequel that would help me to explore my male protagonist, Isamu, and learn a little bit more about his past and where he had come from. I wrote the intro paragraph, which is by far one of my favorite excerpts that I've written throughout

this project thus far. That semester, however, I didn't get much further than that before I copped out and used the short Becoming Hibakusha piece I had written in Professor Noll's class as the first chapter to satisfy the requirements of that assignment.

The idea to juxtapose Isamu's Seijin No Hi with his hospital visit came about through my conversations with Dr. Nyri Bakkalian, a Japanese expert at the University of Pittsburgh. After that framework had been established, once I picked the story back up in the fall semester of 2018, it seemed to flow pretty smoothly throughout the one week I had given myself to write it, and I am thoroughly pleased with what it turned into. The five women Isamu observes through his hospital window are intended to be symbolic of his future relationship with Ichiko. The "angel" in white and gold stands for the revival and joyous opportunities of new life that he will be able to experience due to meeting her. The tall, stout woman in green symbolizes their first date at the Hanami festival. The woman in yellow represents joy and contentment, while the lady in red represents passion and fiery love. The woman in grey who has experienced "earth shattering tragedy" is actually a representation of Ichiko's grief following Isamu's death. Additionally, the four men in black hakamas who are trailing them are representative of both of their deaths (due to the similarity of pronunciation between the two words, the Japanese often associate *four* with *death*, so be cognizant of that when you see me mentioning four in any of my stories).

My other favorite part of this story is when Isamu experiences the flashback due to the blue cloth that triggers his memories of the day the bomb was dropped. This bit of memory occurs after he has already seen his caretaker and his older brother eviscerated by the flames (a scene which is revealed in Chapter 1 of the novel). The quote, "Bright

blue cloth fluttered in the wind. Birds with charred wings struggled to fly. Meanwhile, man struggled with the incomprehensible; ‘Why?’” borrows from one of my favorite Kurt Vonnegut quotes which reads:

“Tiger got to hunt,  
Bird got to fly;  
Man got to sit and wonder ‘why why why?’  
Tiger got to sleep,  
Bird got to land;  
Man got to tell himself he understand.”

In terms of revisions for this story, one of the biggest issues (which isn’t hard to fix, but it was blatantly western) was that of the explicit diagnosis that Isamu was given. Apparently, Japanese doctors can be very indirect, even to the point of not telling patients that they were dying of cancer until they were only a few days away from death. In the first iteration of the story, I had a paragraph detailing Isamu’s emotions when the doctors had told him that he had chronic myeloid leukemia. In the rewrite, I will either find a way for him to happen upon that information due to mischance or luck, or I will simply change it to the doctor vaguely relaying his diagnosis in very cryptic language.

### **Symbolism, Meaning and Inspiration: Chapter 1**

I want to put this on the record: I absolutely love my first and second chapters. They aren’t without their faults, and even in their finished form for this thesis they will still need revision as the novel continues to develop, but even so, I love them. When I began to write the first chapter, all I knew is that I wanted to have Isamu admiring the A-

bomb dome and then proceed from there. As I did research on the geography of Hiroshima, it just turned out that the *Chugoku Shimbun*, a well-known Hiroshima newspaper (one that had existed before WW2 and had its own history tied in with that of the bombing, which was a plus), happened to be located directly on the opposite side of the peace park directly across from the A-bomb dome. After I had discovered that, writing the first section became incredibly easy.

The language I used in the second paragraph regarding the school children being guided through their field trip was inspired by Dr. Siegenthaler's article on *Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese Guidebooks*. While the school children are essentially analogous to cows or sheep through my use of "mosied and herded" and there is a bit of criticism in my reference to a "reconstructed historical field trip...demarcating the Genbaku dome as a respectable historical monument," I am by no means intending to be disparaging of the Japanese individually. Historical reconstruction in the way of museums, guidebooks, tours, statues, etc. all serve as imperfect means of telling historical truths and we are all subject to their influence. The aspects that people deem to be important regarding a historical moment are those that are brought to the forefront of our collective memories at the cost of a lot of peripheral events that weren't deemed as important. The irony inherent in the peace park is that they've decided to pick one plot of land and a few distinguishable buildings to represent the entirety of the event, when in reality all of Hiroshima experienced the bomb. Even the outskirts are worthy of being considered "hallowed grounds."

I also really enjoyed writing the scene following Isamu's orientation in the office where he's wandering the streets of Hiroshima reflecting on his near-death experience



with the red car that day and his near-death experience with the bomb sixteen years before. The song that awoke Isamu from his daymare and the lyrics that he heard were borrowed from a song released in Japan in 1962 (as this is a piece of fiction, I am reserving the right to include a song from 1962 in 1961 Japan) called *Ue o Muite Arukou* and was later renamed *Sukiyaki* for its western release (although Sukiyaki is a food that bears no relation to the song or its lyrics, it was easier for western audiences to pronounce and remember). *Ue o Muite Arukou* translates to “I look up as I walk” and is therefore a much more appropriate title for the song. It is truly beautiful and I’m really happy that I found it through my YouTube searches. While most of the lyrics are borrowed, I had to repurpose the language for the purposes of my writing and I also got to add a bit of my own interpretation of what the lyrics meant as well, which was fun.

Now to my favorite part: the buck and doe. With the symbolism of the buck and doe, I essentially gave the ending of my novel to the audience in the first and second chapter. The buck represents Isamu and his death is as “inevitable” as the inexorable laws of gravity exerting themselves on a falling object. Even Ichiko’s light punt of the buck attempting to break its fall resembles the salvation that their relationship offers Isamu before the tragic end. The slight upward trajectory is the small amount of happiness and normalcy they were able to provide each other. The same goes for the doe and Isamu breaking the doe into hundreds of pieces. It shatters just like Ichiko’s heart will after losing Isamu to leukemia.

The focus in the first chapter has to do with the union of the buck and doe in their deaths. I tried to use as much language as possible to show their togetherness even after their deaths. The solidarity they possessed and the immense love they had for one

another. One of my favorite lines, “Like puzzle pieces being reunited or the snug fit of a glove on a hand, the fusion of the buck and doe felt natural to Isamu,” borrows from a wonderful noir romance movie called *Hiroshima Mon Amour* that I had watched to help get insight into what a Japanese hospital in the 1960s would have looked like. The movie was phenomenal and it helped provide inspiration for their love story, my descriptions of the suffering experienced after the bombs (there were a few scenes with hordes of people covered in keloid scars right after the bomb), and much more. As such, I knew that I had wanted to borrow the language from their opening because I loved the analogy of a lover’s body fitting like the snug fit of a glove on a hand. Not only was it an apt analogy, but I also wanted to be able to pay homage to its influences on my writing and I knew that line was going to somehow find its way into the chapter.

The critiques I got from Chapter One were mostly regarding historical inaccuracies or just my unfamiliarity with the Japanese people. Originally, Ichiko had green eyes and that would have meant she had foreign blood, which would have meant she would have been even more ostracized as not only a burakumin, but an outsider as well. I had also just instinctively included women in the workplace at the newspaper, which likely wouldn’t have been the case. The same goes for my inclusion of cubicles, which really didn’t get big until the 1970s. So, for the most part, my rewrites and revisions for Chapter One are these relatively small discrepancies that threaten to break the immersion and reality of the fiction.

## Symbolism, Meaning and Inspiration: Chapter 2

The biggest challenge regarding this novel is going to be the back and forth nature of retelling the same scenes through differing points of view, ensuring that each scene is unique enough to the individual protagonist that more is revealed through their interaction and therefore I'm not boring my audience with the information I had already given them in the previous chapter. Chapter 2 takes place on the same day as does the previous chapter, the events experienced from Ichiko's point of view. This positioning allowed me to introduce her and the plights she will be facing (ostracization as a burakumin in Japanese society), which will then be resolved in her love affair with Isamu.

For those unaware, chopsticks embedded in a bowl of rice is a tradition at funerals. A bowl of rice with chopsticks standing straight up will be left for the deceased and as such, it would be extremely taboo to recreate that symbol outside of that context. The YouTube video that depicted that custom featured a young girl who ended up being scolded by her mother for demonstrating it in her own bowl of rice, which inspired me to use it as the introductory scene. Additionally, the ingredients used in Ichiko's *tamago kake gohan* are symbolic once again of Isamu and Ichiko's future love affair and the way they become intertwined. While I use the intermixing of the egg and rice to highlight Ichiko's parents' relationship, I do so mainly to get the audience in the mindset of seeing the ingredients as more than just ingredients and to tie them to some sort of love relationship (essentially foreshadowing Isamu and Ichiko's union).

One of the ironies that will be brought out more as the novel progresses is that while Hiroshima is the self-proclaimed "beacon of world peace," it was extremely reliant

upon its military armament industries for its rebirth and reconstruction. Nihon Seiko was a big company selling lots of artillery to the United States, especially as the Vietnam War escalated, and some of their biggest factories were located in Hiroshima. This irony will be highlighted when Isamu and the uncle are forced to meet. An hibakusha as an unwilling poster child for peace, meeting an individual whose existence is made possible and entirely supported by war, death, and destruction.

Ichiko's insistence on continuing to wear the *rando* despite her having graduated from grade school was a fun piece to write because it is essentially how I feel as a senior nearing graduation. I have so thoroughly enjoyed my time in college and I am bemoaning the fact that I am having to leave academia, so that passage was essentially an outlet for my expressions of reluctance and the fact that I have yet to come to terms with this impending change in life stage that I am about to undergo. The introduction to the "real world," as they say.

The language surrounding her discrimination on her way to work, i.e., as *eta* and *hinin*, were terms that I had gotten from several news articles I had read regarding burakumin experiences in Japan. While I am not Japanese and I have not been present to witness that sort of discrimination, I used the nearest analogy I could think of, the U.S. and our history of discrimination against African Americans, as inspiration for those scenes. One unique aspect about burakumin discrimination, though, stems from the fact that their differentiation is only evident through ancestral records. Looking at two Japanese people, one being a burakumin and the other not, no one would be able to distinguish between the two, unlike the differences in race we face in the United States.

In the second chapter, Ichiko's focus on the buck and doe had to deal with their actual existence, before and after being broken apart. I did this because I wanted to transpose certain qualities and features onto Isamu that wouldn't necessarily be present in his stature and physique. Strength, bravery, and dominance are all features that Isamu possesses internally but would not be readily apparent given his diminished stature and emaciated state caused by exposure to radiation. Additionally, Ichiko's existential concerns regarding the purpose the buck and doe served and whether they affected the world with their absence mirror the question of whether Isamu and Ichiko's absence in the world has forever changed the flow of history.

Another interesting aspect of chapters one and two that I had unconsciously included was Isamu's fight against the implacable laws of space time and Ichiko's attempts to overcome the inexorable laws of gravity. Initially, when I had written Chapter One, I had written that part in without truly understanding why I had done so. I lacked the language to describe their purpose and the ideological framework that gave them meaning. After reading the beginning of Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*, I realized that those were merely expressions of the undeniable truths of their facticity. They were truths that could not be changed no matter how hard they tried, just like Isamu's leukemia and subsequent death, Ichiko's status as a burakumin, and Japan's ostracization of both hibakusha and burakumin.

Overall, I was lucky in that Chapter Two didn't receive all that much criticism. The main revisions that were necessary were grammatical in nature and thus didn't necessitate immense amounts of time, which was good because my focus really needs to be on stories one and two, *Becoming Hibakusha* and *You are Going to Die*.

**FAQ (Actually questions I wish I had been asked during my  
thesis presentation but wasn't)**

- Do you regret your habit of procrastination?

Yes and no. Yes, it undeniably made my life harder as I had to rush to get some things done. The first two stories were written in the span of two weeks since I had already started on them in previous semesters. The first chapter took me three weeks (I would spend an hour or two and only come out with one sentence, which was agonizing). However, despite the fact that I planned to give myself three weeks to write Chapter 2, I procrastinated until there were only three days left until our first draft submission was due. While that was undoubtedly a stressful experience, all creative projects are products of the moment in which they were constructed. Had I written the second chapter throughout the three weeks I had given myself, the story I would have ended up with might not have looked anything like the story I wrote. And I am immensely happy with what they turned out to be, so while procrastination has made my life difficult, it was also a crucial part of my creative process and ultimately I am pleased with the results.

- What inspired this topic?

I believe my initial interest in this topic stems from the personal stake that I have in these historical events. My great-grandfather was a tank gunner in World War II and he was slated to be on the first wave invading Japan, which had something like a 95%+ projected fatality rate. So I think it's safe to say

that had Japan not surrendered and therefore America had been forced to invade, I probably would have never existed and thus never been able to write this thesis. But the question regarding the justification of dropping the atomic bombs and how much they actually contributed to Japan's subsequent surrender is one filled with all sorts of ambiguity and debate. Unfortunately, my thesis didn't really focus on this question at all, however I think the question of the justification for the decision to drop the atomic bombs and how that impacted my ability to exist is what initially drew me to the topic.

- What does the future of this project look like?

My brief timeline is as follows:

Chapter 1: Written

Chapter 2: Written

Chapter 3: Time away from each other

Chapter 4: Time away from each other

Chapter 5: Hanami festival first date

Chapter 6: Hanami festival first date

The order in which each point of view will switch is still up in the air. One of my main concerns is that I want the narrative to be an equal balance between both the male and female protagonists, and I have accomplished that in terms of textual allocation. However, the argument could still be made that Isamu's exposition leads, thus elevating the status of the man. I'm thinking of mitigating that by allowing Chapter 3 to be told from Ichiko's perspective and disrupting the initial cadence that I established in chapters 1 and 2. This would

also work well for the purposes of the narrative, because it will allow Isamu's preparation for how he's going to go in and woo Ichiko to remain unknown to the reader until it occurs, therefore enhancing their reactions to his attempts. Additionally, it is clearly evident that this outline is far from complete. I have the end in mind, and I have the first two chapters written with an idea for the next four chapters. As I write these four chapters, I'm going to allow Ichiko and Isamu's interactions to provide insight into where the novel should proceed from there on. I've thoroughly enjoyed looking at this creative project as a journey of uncovering their story, as opposed to seeing myself as a divine creator. Their story exists, it's merely my job to bring it into our existence and tell it as they would want it to be told.

- Given your constant concern for cultural appropriation and the problems you've faced with the accurate portrayal of your characters, do you think you've overhyped those fears or were you not wary enough?

I think I overhyped my concerns, to be one hundred percent honest. It's clearly evident that being conscious of these issues is important when you're writing from a perspective that is unfamiliar to your own. However, I think these concerns were one of the biggest reasons that I spent putting off the actual writing and doing an extensive amount of research. I put off the writing until it was absolutely necessary, and I think I would have been fine starting the writing earlier on and relying on Dr. Siegenthaler's expertise to ensure that I remained within appropriate boundaries and accurate portrayals.

- Why did you focus on Hiroshima and not Nagasaki?



Hiroshima is the “beacon of world peace” and city leaders spent a lot of time elevating the status of hibakusha in the public eye, particularly after the Lucky Dragon Five incident where fishermen got exposed to radiation due to America’s testing of nuclear bombs on the Bikini Atolls in 1954. However, they also, ironically, didn’t seem to care much for the hibakusha aside from their roles as mascots for the cause. Support for their treatment and care was non-existent on a national level before Lucky Dragon Five, and even after they were appropriated as the anti-nuclear mascots the care they were afforded was severely limited. Nagasaki had its own way of dealing with hibakusha and the bombing and from what I could glean through my research it was more about trying to forget and gloss over that part of their history. So Hiroshima’s constant confrontation with these concerns was much more conducive to the sort of situations and ironies I wanted Isamu to be a part of.

## **Becoming Hibakusha**

“Fear must be stamped out, if we are to survive,” Katsu intoned as he strode in front of his assembled company. Or, rather, what his commanding officer had called a “company” when he gave Katsu this assignment. He continued, “The enemy plans to invade our country and defile the purity of the Japanese land, culture, and its most sacred people.” One solitary table stood before the assembly, and on it lay one rifle. However, boxes filled with hundreds of wooden rifle cutouts stood next to the table, courtesy of Naka Ward’s high school student volunteers. “Before you, I have laid out the means by which you can prevent this atrocity from occurring.” He gestured over the boxes of toy rifles. “Should the American forces make it onto our homeland, we must be willing to sacrifice everything, even our lives, in the service of our Emperor AND our nation.”

“Soldier, what is your name?” he asked turning to a boy who couldn’t have been older than fifteen.

“Yamamoto Kazuki, sir!” The words barreled out into the courtyard as the boy stood resolute, with his back straight, arms stiffly glued to his side, and his chest inflated with feigned passion as he desperately tried to mask his unease. He had been issued a uniform, however the uniform was one size too large, which was clearly evident from the way his sleeves extended below his wrists and covered half his hands. Katsu could see the beads of sweat begin to form and roll down Yamamoto’s face as his commanding officer’s intimidating presence began to break his fledgling resolve.

Dialing back on his usual drill sergeant routine, Katsu took pity on Yamamoto and said, “At ease soldier, that was a fine salute. Ever held a rifle before?”

“N-No, no sir.”

“Well come here.” Katsu motioned to the young man. “This is the Arisaka Type 38. It’s the Japanese standard issue bolt-action infantry rifle. Here take this.” The youth gingerly accepted the rifle, seeming to be unsure of what to do with it. “Place the stock on your shoulder like...so. In order to aim you must line the aiming reticle in front of your face with the iron sights at the end of the gun. Once you have your shot lined up, you only need to pull the trigger. Pretty simple, huh?” Yamamoto nodded, still focused intently on the invisible enemy lurking unseen, waiting to strike. \*Click\* Yamamoto was ready to save them all. “Good. Now let’s see that resolve when the gun’s really loaded.”

It took roughly half an hour to finish explaining the mechanics of the rifles. Then, with the help of Hagiwara Jun, Katsu passed out the rifle cutouts to the old men and children of the Second General Army’s Fourth Guerilla Company. Once everybody was armed and ready, Katsu gave the order to begin the gun range training, which was mainly intended to get the civilians comfortable with the weight and feel of a rifle.

“What do you think of this?” Katsu motioned to the field of boys playing soldier, of men acting out their duties. Katsu could always count on Jun, his second-in-command, to provide sound advice.

Jun cleared his throat and replied, “This does not bode well for the war effort. If command is ordering us to train civilians, we must be running critically low on manpower. Earlier, I was tasked with inspecting the latest batch of Type 99’s that they’re going to give our defense units before the invasion, and they were really shoddy. The

wood on several of the stocks and grips was not sanded properly, some of the sights weren't properly aligned, and I even had to set a few aside because their bolt assemblies were completely inoperable. If the Americans invade with their full force, I don't know if our defense forces will be able to repel them."

"Yes, you're probably right. You don't think the Emperor would accept the Allies' surrender terms do you?" Katsu questioned aloud.

"No. The Emperor would never surrender. We are just going to have to fight this one out," Jun said as he turned and smiled at Katsu. His words had been honest. However, despite the situation Jun maintained his optimism and firm belief that Japan would find a way to be victorious. Katsu envied Jun's unyielding faith, because he couldn't find it in himself to be so sure.

"Right...." Katsu solemnly watched the training operation unfold. Everything seemed to be running smoothly, which was a miracle if Katsu had ever seen one. One-hundred fifty-one conscripted civilians had been placed under his command and, having had issues with maintaining discipline in companies full of battle-tested soldiers, he was surprised that he had yet to encounter any difficulties with the ragtag bunch he had been assigned today.

"Are you worr-" A sharp cry cut Jun short. Its guttural intensity had shocked everyone in the training yard into a stand still. For a second, time seemed frozen.

"Yamamoto's hit! We need a medic!" Katsu leapt towards the cries and commotion just in time to see Yamamoto slump to the ground as he tried vainly to keep his blood from leaving the gaping hole in his abdomen. A young boy with a rifle stood next to him in disbelief muttering to himself about the bullet that shouldn't have been in

the chamber. Decisively, and with the aura of calm, calculated reasoning that he had developed through two previous military tours in China, Katsu grabbed the rifle from the boy's hands, tossed it to the ground, clutched both of the boy's hands and led them to Yamamoto's bullet wound.

"You made a mistake. Let's make sure that it wasn't a permanent one," Katsu consoled as he helped the boy apply pressure to the wound. "Keep this pressed to prevent the bleeding." Katsu lifted Yamamoto on his side. Katsu's initial assumption was validated as he noticed Yamamoto's uniform slowly turning a dark red from his back side. Easing Yamamoto back down while keeping his hand firmly pressed on the exit bullet wound, Katsu informed everyone, "The good news is that the bullet went all the way through. If you didn't hit anything too important and he doesn't lose too much blood, he should live. We need to get him to the Shima Surgical Clinic now." Just then two soldiers carrying a stretcher arrived and began loading Yamamoto's now unconscious body. Katsu and the boy allowed themselves to be replaced by other soldiers as they pressed bandages to both wounds and lifted the stretcher to rush him off to the nearest vehicle.

"Jun, you take over the rest of the class. I'm going to the hospital. Everybody back to work!" The boy who had shot Yamamoto remained on his knees, crouched in his stupor, unable to shake himself out of his daze. "You coming?" Katsu asked as he began walking towards the road, his back to the boy.

Katsu watched through his periphery as the words registered in the boy's mind. He shook his head to regain his senses, and replied timidly, "Yes, sir," as he rose to his feet. Etched on the boy's face was a combination of fear, dread, and disbelief that froze

his features into the hollow, shell-shocked caricature of a defeated soldier. Memories flooded back to Katsu as he remembered all the times he had seen soldiers under his command with this same look of defeat and loss. The only difference this time was the youthful innocence of this boy's features that suddenly seemed aged by many years, incapable of maintaining their childish bliss under the weight of this immense burden. He padded alongside Katsu, head turned down and shoulders slumped in abandoned resignation.

As they both hopped into the vehicle, Katsu asked, "So what's your name, kid?"

"Kobayashi Ippei, sir."

"So do you know Yamamoto well?"

"Yes sir. We grew up together. We had just been messing around. He had called me an American savage and pretended to fire a round in my direction and so I did the same. I thought the gun had been empty. I swear I didn't mean for this to—" Kobayashi's voice caught as his eyes landed on his still blood-soaked hands. With obvious distress, Kobayashi began trying to scrub his hands clean of his close friend's gore.

"Hey, calm down, calm down," Katsu said with the most matronly and reassuring voice he could muster. As he grabbed Kobayashi's hand he promised, "Yamamoto's going to be alright. Our response was really fast and they are going to get him to the doctors with plenty of time to save his life. You did not kill Yamamoto. I promise."

Katsu started the jeep and after a short five-minute drive they had arrived at Shima Surgical Clinic. Yamamoto had arrived several minutes before them and was already in the operating room being tended to by the only surgeon available. Katsu and Kobayashi were quickly directed to the waiting room, where they did the one thing that

was in their power, wait. After two hours, the surgeon emerged from the room and walked towards Katsu and Kobayashi. Katsu attempted to anticipate the news from the doctor's face, however his expression was entirely unreadable.

Kobayashi's body went tense as he prepared for the worst. "I'm sorry." The doctor paused and stared at the ground as if to gather his thoughts before continuing on. "I did my best. I tried, I really did. There was nothing I could do to stop the bleeding. I'm sorry."

"No. That can't be. There must be something you can do to save him!" Kobayashi insisted.

"It's too late. Yamamoto's already gone. I am so sorry."

Kobayashi's face contorted as he shut his eyes and grappled with the reality the surgeon had just laid out for him. Katsu could see the disbelief, the shame, all the different shades of grief and loss coalescing in Kobayashi's facial features. Turning to the doctor, Katsu said, "Thank you for your hard work, Doctor. You did the best you could." The doctor subsequently bowed then turned around and left from where he had come. Katsu turned his attention to Kobayashi, who still had his eyes shut and had begun to shake his head. "I'm going to have to file a report with command about this. Then I'll have to make a house call to inform his parents. Would you like me to drop you off at your home before I do everything else?"

Kobayashi opened his eyes and firmly shook his head in dissent, before speaking up. "No. This is my fault. I pulled the trigger, so this is my responsibility. His parents should hear the news from me."

"Ok. So be it." Katsu said as he stood and admired the boy's resolve.

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“So.... Did the boy live?” Jun inquired as Katsu entered the office they shared. Sitting squarely in the center of Katsu’s desk, Jun had strategically positioned himself with the intention of obstructing Katsu. Unamused, Katsu removed his jacket and subsequently sunk himself into Jun’s office chair.

After a succinct sigh, he replied, “No. The boy did not survive surgery. I was later informed that Shima Surgical had run out of coagulant and so the surgeon had been unable to stop the bleeding long enough to stitch him back up properly.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” While Jun sounded sincere, Katsu could hear the accusatory undertones lurking beneath Jun’s statement and knew that it was only a matter of time before Jun would confront him about it. “That is unfortunate. Yamamoto seemed like he would have made an excellent soldier. It’s a true shame. However, we shouldn’t let this one tragedy distract us from our duties. I’ll remind you that we are engaged in a war where we have lost a lot more than one life.”

“He wasn’t a soldier though. He shouldn’t have been anywhere near a gun. He hasn’t even graduated High School yet. And secondly, he died today because the rifle we handed him had a dud round in it that finally went off. Wasn’t it our duty to inspect the rifles before letting untrained civilians play around with them? Isn’t this our fault?”

“Yes, it is our fault. We should have been more thorough in our inspection. However, what’s done is done. All that we can do now is move forward and continue to do our best. Unfortunately, the fact of the matter is that wars necessitate casualties. In order to win a war, you have to be willing to take risks and accept losses when things don’t go your way. So if Yamamoto had to give his life to prevent us from being



destroyed, so be it. He and millions of others will sacrifice their lives so that Japan can survive and eventually win this war. While you lost sight of the bigger picture and spent five hours flitting away the time, how many hundreds of our soldiers were dying on the front line? What do you think happened to the duties that you abdicated? Did those logistics sort themselves? Supply lines package and ship themselves?"

"Oh, right. Those requisition forms for our company. They were due this afternoon. Did they get turned in on time? Or am I in trouble?"

"You are in trouble...because you owe me. I filled them out and turned them in earlier." Jun slyly smirked with a devious twinkle in his eye that made Katsu tremendously nervous. "And I am going to collect on that favor right now."

"Oh, well this ought to be good. What is this so called 'favor' of yours?" Katsu confidently piped, despite the growing dread of what Jun might say.

"Tomorrow, instead of doing your normal morning officer duties, you and I are needed in Naka ward. My little sister told me that her school was in need of leadership in their fire lane clearing efforts. I figured a military presence would do them good. Keep them motivated. And my sister can't stop talking about you, so that's a plus."

"No. Absolutely not. Anything but that. Please." Katsu pleaded with genuine sincerity. "I'd prefer that you didn't try and set me up with your sister all the time. Frankly, it's a bit weird considering how long I've known both of you. If anything, I should be like an uncle to her, having watched her grow up all these years."

"Too late!" Jun chuckled. "I already cleared it with the brass. You're relieved of your duty for community service tomorrow. A lot can happen in five hours Katsu, you

really shouldn't slack off. Oh, and please do behave around my sister." Jun added with a wink.

"Ugh. You disgust me, ya know that?" After a moment of contemplation Katsu spoke up, defeated, "Fine then. I'll do it if that'll get you off my back. I just hope you know this isn't teaching me any lessons."

"Eh. You won't need to learn any lessons if you end up marrying Ichigo. She's plenty wise enough to be able to keep you out of trouble. And think about it: We could be brother in-laws. Officially family. Wouldn't you want that?"

"Jun, we don't need a marriage for that. We're family irregardless. You will always be a brother to me."

"I'm glad to hear that. You should still consider it. My parents would be elated."

"Ok, we're done talking about this. I'll see you tomorrow bright and early." Katsu rose and grabbed his jacket from the coat stand. "I hope we have a better day tomorrow than we did today. I don't want any more kids to needlessly die."

"Me neither, Katsu. Nobody does."

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Fulfilling his promise, Katsu was out leading the schoolgirls in their fire lane clearing efforts early the next morning. They had begun at six when the sun had just risen from its night of absence. Two hours had passed without incident and Katsu's duties were nearing their end. The Nagarekawa Methodist Church stood strong and resolute in the near distance, marking the three-quarters point of their assignment. Katsu estimated that he had to endure at most another hour of this benign torture before he could finally leave and consider his debt to Jun repaid.

Luckily, thus far, Ichigo's advances had been thwarted by Katsu's wholehearted dedication to the role of leader. He had purposefully kept himself centered in the middle of all the other girls that he was helping to direct, never giving her an opportunity to separate him from the group and strike. This plan had been foolproof, until the sirens began to blare signaling incoming enemy aircraft. Within two minutes, Katsu had every one of the schoolgirls safely accounted for in the nearest air raid shelter. Everyone except for Ichigo.

Due to his leadership role and the fact that it was Jun's little sister, Katsu ordered the schoolgirls to remain in the shelter until the all clear was given, then he left to go find Ichigo. He remembered that since she had no opening to talk to Katsu, Ichigo had always been going ahead of the group, remaining just barely in sight the entire time. As Katsu walked up the street in the direction of the church, Ichigo suddenly walked into the road and waved to him with her hand over her head, as if he was at risk of not seeing the only person out in the open in the entire city.

"Over here Katsu!" she carelessly exclaimed. "I need your help lifting some heavy debris behind the church."

"Are you deaf, Ichigo? The air raid siren just went off. We shouldn't be in the street. It's dangerous."

"Oh, aren't you a stickler. I wouldn't be so worried. I saw the plane they were warning about. It was alone. If they were going to fire-bomb us, they wouldn't just send one plane. Stop being such a worrier and help me move this debris. The sooner we can get this finished, the sooner you can get away from me, right?"

"I wouldn't say that.... I just..."

“Oh come on Katsu, don’t try to lie to me. You haven’t been able to look in my direction for longer than a second without getting embarrassed. So I make you uncomfortable now. My confession was a mistake. Got it.”

“I’m sorry. I just don’t feel the same way about you as you do about me. I really don’t want this to ruin the relationship we had. Let’s get back to the point where I was like your big brother.”

“Fine. Let’s go.” Ichigo abruptly turned about-face and began walking back in the direction of the church. Katsu followed her, admiring the building’s clean stone architecture. Inlaid in the four arched windows that lined the sides of the church were beautiful mosaics of colored glass distorting the color of any light that went in or out. Its steeple rose high into the sky, demanding recognition and respect. Soon Ichigo was crouching next to three opened and discarded boxes that were roughly five meters in length and one meter tall. Even Katsu couldn’t have carried these himself. He crouched and grabbed his end and lifted simultaneously with Ichigo. While they were disposing of the first box, the all-clear siren sounded, informing everyone that the threat had passed. As he had ordered, the girls were all likely leaving the safety of the bunker to resume their cleaning duties.

Following Ichigo’s lead again, Katsu had crouched down by the side of the church to get the second box, his head level with the bottom of one of the church’s glass windows, when a light brighter than he’d ever seen flashed through the mosaic to his left and then the world exploded around him. Suddenly, he was on his back watching the world burn with only half his vision. He turned his head and saw Ichigo laid sprawled out before him in his foreground, while in the background hell engulfed reality. The

incomprehensibility of what just happened, combined with the severity of his injuries threw Katsu's body into shock. As he tried to grasp the reality of the situation, consciousness failed him.

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Whispers surrounded him like billowy clouds. Indeterminate in meaning, they echoed through Katsu's skull, incessantly making it impossible to concentrate on anything. As he slowly gathered himself together he finally gathered enough courage to open his eyes and see what had happened. As soon as he did, though, he regretted his decision. Everywhere he looked he saw nightmares. To his right was a couple who had been directly exposed to the blast. As he looked the man sat up, faceless, his two eye balls dangling from their nerve cords swinging outside of their sockets. The man slowly lifted his hands to coddle his exposed organs, lightly touching them at first, unsure of the reality that confronted him. As the realization slowly consumed him he rocked back and forth moaning incoherently. His wife, who could only be identified by the tattered remains of her purple dress, lay on the ground lifeless, as her skin continued to further melt into the ground.

A loud moan quickly aroused Katsu's attention and he scanned his left side to determine the source. As he turned his head, he recoiled in fear as he watched a creature of unspeakable horrors shuffle towards him, whispering his name and begging for help. A name tag on the uniform of this individual identified him as Hagiwara Jun, Katsu's best friend, but other than that, this creature bore no resemblance to the Jun that Katsu knew. Jun had his arms outstretched, attempting to grasp at the rescue that he thought Katsu could offer him. Unfortunately, his strength failed him and Jun silently plopped onto his

side and in doing so, allowed the contents of his stomach to spill out onto the ground through his weakened chest cavity. Katsu watched in shock as he saw his best friend's guts spill onto the pavement, congealing with all the other radioactive gore that was now filling the entirety of all the streets in the city.

Katsu's mind overflowed with the images of the atrocities that he was witnessing and soon shock overtook his body and held him captive to its will. Despite his best attempts, Katsu was unable to summon the amount of courage required to stand up and help those around him. So he sat there for hours, silently taking it all in.

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"Our relations with you will be most intimate when we rely upon you as our limbs and you look to us as your head." The professor read from the *Imperial Precepts to Soldiers and Sailors*. "It says that 'When we are able to guard the empire, and so prove ourselves worthy of Heaven's blessings and repay the benevolence of our ancestors. The soldier and sailor should consider loyalty their essential duty.'" Specific emphasis was put on the words 'loyalty' and 'essential duty' in order to convey the significance of their meaning. As the professor had been lecturing, he had been marching up and down the classroom with the dedication of a drill sergeant. With the end of this last passage, the professor had stopped on the side of the class opposite of Katsu, but now he abruptly turned and continued, preaching, "Never fall into disgrace and bring dishonor by failing in moral principles." With these final words decreed over the classroom as if they were the very words of God, the professor intently stared Katsu down, to the point where he began considering what he could have done to upset his sensei. "Wake up." The professor suddenly said in a woman's voice. "Wake up."

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“Eventually, I woke up to discover that I had lost my left eye.” Katsu’s voice, amplified by the microphone, blanketed the entire auditorium. “Several shards of glass from the window of the church had embedded themselves into the left side of my face, one being large enough to completely destroy my eyeball. Due to my wife’s skillful persuasion and my relatively high rank, I was lucky enough to have a doctor remove the glass before I regained consciousness. This, along with the keloids that mark my body and the scars that touch my soul, is something that I will have to live with until the day I die.

“After I had rested for a day, I gathered the strength to begin helping the doctors care for the wounded. We did what we could, but without medical supplies and equipment there was very little we could do. Most of the time we just tried to ease their passing. We brought people water, prayed with them, hugged their loved ones, and watched powerlessly as they left us.” Katsu paused to solidify his resolve and give the audience a moment to digest the horrors he was conveying to them. As he stared out into the crowd, he saw the many faces of those marching for peace, those who, like him, were doing their best to prevent such an event from ever occurring again.

“Eventually the surrender was ratified and foreign aid began pouring into the city. Things gradually improved. However, the intensity of the suffering we felt, physically, emotionally, spiritually, is beyond comprehension. Words will never be sufficient to be able to quantify those experiences and time will never let us forget. However, such suffering has given me purpose. It is why I am here today. It is why we are all here today. It is why I must tell this story. Ultimately, it is why my becoming hibakusha was not a

complete curse, but rather a curse with a gift. In order to give meaning to our suffering, we must strive to learn from our mistakes and therefore prevent them from being made again in the future.”



## **You Are Going to Die**

*You are going to die.*

There it is. The inescapable truth of mortality laid out for all to see. In this case, Tanaka Isamu was reasonably sure that his death wasn't some abstract occurrence that would inevitably happen forty to fifty years down the road. No, no, Isamu's death was an imminent affair, ceaselessly arresting his thoughts and actions, actively imposing itself into his daily life.

It was 12:05 p.m. on January 15, 1961, in Hiroshima, Japan. The city's youth bustled in unbridled anticipation of Seijin No Hi, the coming-of-age holiday for all the new twenty-year-olds. Seijin-shiki were undoubtedly already being held in auditoriums and conference halls all across the nation, where the newly appointed adults were being invited to contemplate their past and to envision their future. Alcohol would be drunk, cigarettes would be smoked, and all manner of exultations would be made to celebrate their newfound adulthood and the future they possessed.

Meanwhile, Isamu watched on from his hospital bed. A nurse entered the room carting in an IV stand with a bag of poison dangling prominently from a hook. Isamu held out his right arm with the sacrificial solemnity of a martyr who has already accepted his fate. The nurse went about skillfully inserting the IV into Isamu's vein and the lifesaving poison began to run freely throughout his bloodstream, indiscriminately killing all manner of living matter. Silently, the nurse left and Isamu continued to stare out the window, enjoying the ephemeral pleasure of watching the multicolored masses of

kimonos shift and glimmer as if he were standing above the ocean observing the shifts in tide.

It was a bright, sunny day when one of the nurses had left his medical file in his room by accident. “Chronic Myeloid Leukemia” had been the first bolded letters that he had laid his eyes upon. He had asked the nurse what it meant. How severe his condition was. She just shook her head and avoided making eye contact with him. Even now, six months later, the dire reality of the situation had still not fully impressed itself on Isamu.

Two short raps on the door frame diverted Isamu’s attention from the window. Isamu saw Doctor Saitou standing in the doorway. Dr. Saitou was an unambiguously short man who typified the stereotypical doctor. White lab coat, two pens in his breast pocket, and a stethoscope wrapped around his neck, Dr. Saitou looked as professional as ever. Over the past few months Isamu had gotten to know Dr. Saitou pretty well, considering that he was the main doctor assigned to Isamu’s care, and Isamu had needed a lot of care. He was kind and caring, personable and passionate. Despite his small stature, it seemed that he had the courage and ferocity of several men. While Dr. Saitou was generally agreeable, Isamu had seen a few instances where his emotions had got the best of him and Isamu had come to the conclusion that it would be best to avoid upsetting him. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.” Dr. Saitou walked into the room and came to the foot of Isamu’s bed. It was clear that Dr. Saitou was hiding something behind his back, but he made no immediate mention of it.

“How are you doing?” Isamu merely raised his IV arm in response as if to say, *As good as anyone can be while they’re being pumped full of poison.*

“Right. Umm, stupid question. Ah, don’t you just love Seijin No Hi?” he asked while motioning out the window. “I remember mine like it was yesterday. Our whole family got dressed up and went to the ceremonies. Then afterwards all my friends and I got together and went out drinking. Speaking of which, I understand that this is technically your Seijin No Hi too right?”

“Yeah.” Isamu replied meekly, obviously in no mood for active conversation.

“Well as such, I have brought you a present,” he said, as he whipped out a bottle of sake from behind his back. “Courtesy of all the staff. They felt bad that you’d have to miss out on all the celebration.”

“Thank you.” Isamu intoned as he briefly made eye contact with the doctor before staring silently into his lap.

“As your doctor though, I have to advise against excessive drinking during chemotherapy. One or two cups isn’t a big deal, but getting drunk would not be optimal given your current conditions.”

“Noted.” Isamu went back to staring at the crowds amassing outside the windows. All manner of color coalesced through the tiny aperture through which Isamu had to experience his Seijin No Hi. The unfairness of it all suddenly came crashing over him. He had been trying to repress the thoughts and emotions, but bearing constant witness to the happiness of all his peers threatened to overwhelm him. The harder it became for Isamu to resist weeping, the more he forced himself to stare out the window. He tried to pick out individuals in the crowd and, if only for a second, switch places with them. All his efforts failed and steamy tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Well, I’ll just leave this on your table. Please,” Dr. Saitou paused and bowed to Isamu, “enjoy your Seijin No Hi.” Isamu returned his gaze to his lap and didn’t dare lift his eyes until Dr. Saitou had turned around and left. Once Dr. Saitou was gone, Isamu instantly went back to people watching. Even if he couldn’t participate, he was determined to make the most out of his one Seijin No Hi.

Cars honked and people talked on the streets below. Isamu bore witness to a lively world of excitement, smiles, and laughter passing by with no concern for, or knowledge of, his existence. Through the crowds and commotion, Isamu’s eyes landed on a group of five women clad in multi-colored kimonos followed by four men wearing pitch black hakamas on the opposite side of the street. At the center of attention was a spritely young lady facilitating the conversation of her peers. Despite her short stature, everything seemed to revolve around her. Even looking in her direction was challenging, as the reflection off her exquisitely white kimono was blinding. Inlaid in the white fabric was golden thread depicting budding flowers and blossoming life. She turned to her right and addressed her friend in a yellow kimono, whose smile seemed to exude the warmth and joy of spring.

While the two of them talked, the other three women to the left of center walked in silent observation of what was being said. Closest to the woman in white walked a remarkably tall, stout woman adorned by a dark green kimono serenely enjoying the pleasantries of conversation. To her left, an excitable firecracker dressed in a bright red kimono with the black outline of a dragon giggled and chided as the conversation ebbed and flowed. The bright red of her kimono seemed to complement her rambunctious personality. Aloof from the conversation, the woman on the farthest left dejectedly

plodded alongside her colleagues, seemingly unaware of the world around her. Her face was expressionless and she wore a curiously bland grey kimono. Despite the distance, Isamu could still make out her wide set eyes, the conveyance of disbelief and horror, of earth-shattering tragedy, and it chilled him to his core.

Isamu continued to watch as the five of them approached a bustling intersection with the four boys still in tow. As they approached the crosswalk all four of the girls engaged in the conversation stopped and continued to chat. The woman in gray didn't. She continued in her steady pace, each step coming closer and closer to the edge of the sidewalk. Wind from cars speeding past her whipped her dark black hair around her face and head, clearly indicating imminent danger. Still she continued to step forward. Just as her foot was about to land in the street and Isamu was sure a cargo truck would plow her into the concrete, she was yanked back by the angel in white. Not realizing that he had been holding his breath all this time, Isamu exhaled a sigh of relief and shook his head to clear his thoughts.

As he looked back up to watch their progress once again, Isamu caught sight of a bright blue uniform.

Light. An instantaneous flash.... Then, wails. Moans. Indistinguishable screeching. Voices. All manner of human suffering crying out for... Help. Water. An end to it all.

Isamu was four again. He clamped his hands over his ears, he closed his eyes with all the force his eyelids could exert, but he could still hear them scream and he could still see them walk. Stumble. Collapse and then crumble. Bright blue cloth fluttered in the

wind. Birds with charred wings struggled to fly. Meanwhile, man struggled with the incomprehensible: “Why?”

Through the wreckage, Isamu stumbled aimlessly yet unyieldingly forward. Even had he a destination in mind, there were no longer any landmarks left in the city for him to guide himself by. Hiroshima had been swallowed, consumed and digested by the flames of the sun. What was left was a hellscape of carnage, a flattened wasteland where Death had become God and everyone was subject to His rule. Despite the throbbing in his head, despite the blood that openly flowed down his cheeks, Isamu continued to plod onward keeping his eyes straight ahead, all the while absorbing the horrors of war through his peripheral.

A sharp and sudden wail of grief from his left awakened Isamu from his near catatonic state. Instinctively he jumped and shot his gaze in that direction, incapable of resisting the urge to look, even though he knew it would be against his best interests. He watched as a mother dug through the rubble, attempting to excavate the ruin that had collapsed on her son. His charred arm was all that was visible in the debris and the mother desperately clawed at the wreckage, attempting to free him. As she grabbed each scorching tile or burning ember, she winced as her flesh melted, yet still she continued to dig. After a minute of watching her futile struggles, Isamu noticed the bright white of bone exposing itself on her fingertips. Yet still she persevered, digging, scraping, scratching, destroying her hands in her zealous fervor to save her son.

While she continued her efforts, Isamu continued his journey through hell, searching for a familiar face, for some sense of security and safety. Countless bodies lined the streets. Limbs protruded from wreckage on every side where buildings had once

stood. Of the living, there were those who were relatively unharmed, although they were the minority. The majority, however, had been disfigured by heat and radiation, crushed by the collapse of buildings or flying debris.

Isamu finally reached an intersection and his eyes instantly picked out the familiar, tattered, bright blue remains of a police uniform. What used to be the body of a man lay sprawled out in the center of the intersection on his stomach, bits and pieces of his once pristine uniform still intact. Despite Isamu's suspicions, the man's burns were too severe to distinguish identifiable facial features. Isamu's memories of his uncle's bright eyes and dimpled cheeks contrasted quite horribly with the hollow eye sockets and sunken cheeks that he stared into now. Gathering the courage to discover the truth, Isamu inched closer and closer to the corpse until he could slide his foot under the body and skillfully flip him over. Irreverently and lacking all manner of grace, Isamu kicked the right side of his body up and over, successfully flipping the body on his back.

Isamu retched and had to fight back a wave of vomit as he stared at the pile of organs that had once resided in the corpse's now cavernous abdomen. He failed to keep himself from throwing up, as he saw the pile slowly accumulate and congeal with the ash and debris. Bright shades of red, orange, and yellow, intermixed with black ash and bleak grey. Once his stomach was thoroughly purged and his dry heaves beyond that had subsided, Isamu worked himself up to peeking at the police uniform where the name tag should have been.

"Tanaka."

Three raps on the door jolted Isamu out of his daymare. Startled, he looked toward the door to see a nurse and a sickly looking middle aged man politely waiting behind her.

“Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Tanaka, but we’re running low on rooms. Do you mind if we put Mr. Itou in here while he undergoes his treatment?”

Isamu nodded complacently. The nurse led Mr. Itou to the bed next to Isamu’s and went about her duties setting up the drip IV. Mr. Itou suffered through the discomforts with grace, smiled, and then thanked her when she had finished. To avoid staring, Isamu pretended to go back to his people watching, all the while keeping Mr. Itou at the center of his attention. Mr. Itou carefully scanned the room in what Isamu could only guess was a mixture of curiosity and boredom. After a few moments, Mr. Itou cleared his throat and asked, “Celebrating something today?” clearly referring to the bottle of sake perched on the bedside table to Isamu’s right.

“No, not really. I don’t have much to celebrate after all.” Isamu spoke into his lap, unwilling to establish eye contact and turn this into a prolonged conversation.

“Now, don’t be so grim! You look like a young man to me. I’m sure that today of all days, there should be something for young men such as yourself to celebrate. A crossing of a threshold perhaps?” Mr. Itou slyly intoned.

“Yes, it is my Seijin No Hi, but as you can see I am in no way capable of enjoying the festivities.” Isamu prominently flashed his right arm, allowing his IV to dramatically slither and bounce to emphasize his pointed statement, while he finally deigned to bore a hole into this Mr. Itou for being so markedly blunt and uncouth.



“Hmmm, you’re right about that,” Mr. Itou continued on, seemingly unaware of Isamu’s growing frustration. “Seijin-shiki are definitely out of the question for you. But you seem capable of talking. Pleasant conversation isn’t impossible, is it?”

Caught off guard, Isamu was stunned for a moment, until he finally managed to mutter, “N-no, I guess not....” All the while, he returned his previous vindictive stare back to his lap in shy apprehension, unsure of what was to follow.

“Good. I find that these treatments go by a lot easier when the time is spent talking. But all good conversations with strangers begin with introductions! I am Itou Hajime. You can call me Hajime, if you’d like. And you are?”

“Tanaka Isamu. Please call me Isamu.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Isamu,” Hajime smiled innocently. Isamu was flabbergasted by the man’s indomitable personality. Had it not been for his emaciated state and the IV attached to his right arm, Hajime gave off no impression of terminal illness, and he did not bear the bleak demeanor of the eternally condemned. The more Isamu observed him, the more his curiosity and frustration consumed him.

Finally, the mixture of Isamu’s emotions boiled and brewed until they could not be contained, and they coalesced under the banner of a solitary, forceful inquisition.

“Why! Why are you smiling? Why are you happy? You’re in a hospital bed with an IV in your arm. What do you have to smile about? What makes this ok?” Isamu made a grand gesture to indicate that he was talking about the injustice inherent in the whole world surrounding them.

“Isamu, have you ever attended Hanami before?”

“Of course. It’s a tradition in our family. How do cherry blossom festivals answer my question?”

“Just as you said, Hanami is a yearly tradition. Every year we trust that the cherry trees will blossom and every year they continue to do so without fail. Death is an inevitable season of life, just like the inevitability of the cherry tree bloom. While in bloom, the world exudes beauty and unlimited possibility. However, just like life, the blooms are short lived. If we don’t make the most of it, it vanishes before we know it! So why not? We were lucky enough to be here, even if our time is shorter and slightly more miserable than the average. Why wallow in self-pity, when we can try and enjoy what little life we do have?”

Isamu was quiet for a moment as he digested all that was said.

“Does that all make sense?” Hajime asked after his impatience overcame him.

“Logically, yes. However, I don’t think I can get myself to reconcile that belief system with my genuine emotions. How do you still not feel cheated? I mean, most people don’t have to grapple with terminal cancer. Why us?”

“That’s true. Most people don’t. But, on the other hand, we were lucky enough to exist. We should be grateful that we have the chance to be able to experience these trials and face these adversities. It all comes down to perspective. If you continually use others as your metric for happiness and accomplishment, you will never be content with your own existence. Find happiness and contentedness within yourself and then make it your job to spread that to others. It can be extremely fulfilling.” Hajime said all this with an unwavering grin.

“Maybe I’ll try that.” Isamu said as he pondered the conversation that had transpired and Hajime’s abnormally positive demeanor.

“Have you considered your future yet?” Hajime asked.

Isamu snorted and retorted, “Heh, what future? Oh, are you talking about my next chemo treatment? Yeah, that’s next Tuesday, thanks for asking.”

“No, I’m serious, Isamu. There is a tomorrow. And as long as you have a tomorrow to consider, you shouldn’t take that lightly. Especially considering how few of them you and I have left. Every day is a gift and it’d be a shame to waste it.”

“Ok, well how about it then? Want to live what you preach? Seize the day, right?” Isamu said, as he grabbed the bottle of sake from his night table and broke the seal on the cap. “Help me celebrate my Seijin No Hi, please.”

Hajime chuckled and then replied, “Well, how do I say no to that? I can’t risk being a hypocrite. Pour me a cup!”

Isamu poured two shots into the two small glasses Dr. Saitou had left him, which made him suspicious of whether Dr. Saitou’s machinations had led up to this moment. Isamu grabbed his cup and silently extended it in Hajime’s direction. Hajime picked up his and said, “To the future,” before clinking his glass against Isamu’s. They both drank their drinks with religious solemnity. As Isamu looked toward the doorway, he caught the split-second glimpse of a white and gold kimono darting past his room.

“I wonder...” Isamu thought, considering what could be.

## Chapter 1

Rugged and resolute, the Atomic Bomb dome, formerly known as the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, persevered despite its tragic deformity. Sixteen years after that fateful day, Isamu strolled around admiring the stark disparity between the cheery reality that surrounded him, and the grotesque memory that constantly forced itself to be remembered and re-lived. Ducks gracefully navigated the calm, clear waters of the Ota River, while Isamu watched hundreds of bloated corpses wash downstream from his subconscious. Crowds of people surrounded Isamu in the park, but no one recoiled in terror or wailed in despair. No one seemed to hear the cascade of seared throats rasping in anguish, begging for water.

Laughter and ecstatic conversation overcame Isamu's senses as a swarm of young middle-school students mosied past him. Three teachers herded the group along, leading them through their reconstructed historical field trip. The teacher in the lead turned around as the group approached a placard demarcating the Genbaku dome as a respectable historical monument. She cleared her throat and all the conversation among her students ceased.

"Here, we stand 160 meters southeast of the bomb's hypocenter," she lectured. "The bomb detonated 580 meters above the ground, directly above what was Shima Surgical Clinic, producing surface temperatures of 6,000 degrees Celsius. This means that the atomic bomb's hypocenter was temporarily 500 degrees Celsius hotter than the

surface of the sun. Due to Hiroshima's primarily wood and paper architecture, 60,000 buildings instantaneously caught fire and formed a massive fire storm."

"After the war came to an end, this park was consecrated as a memorial ground to those who lost their lives in the flames and radiation. Being the first city to ever experience the tragedy of nuclear warfare, Hiroshima vowed to become a beacon of world peace and to never allow such an atrocity to ever occur again. As such, the flame of peace will continue to burn inside the Peace Memorial until all the world's nuclear arms are decommissioned."

Isamu turned and looked at his watch. 1:48 PM. Time had gotten away from him. He picked up his pace to walk as quickly as he could without breaking into a full-on jog. Being late for his first day on the job would not bode well for his newfound career as a newspaper journalist at the *Chugoku Shimbun*. As he approached Motoyasu Bridge, sirens whirled in the distant foreground sending chills down Isamu's spine. Not having time to deal with psychological breakdowns, Isamu shook it off and kept marching until he crossed the bridge and was out of the shrill sirens' trauma-inducing reach.

Still, the race against time continued. Various manifestations of peace surrounded him as he hustled, determined to beat the clock. Volunteers and school children helped tend the Peace Rose Garden to his right, while to his left the Peace Flame continued to burn, signifying humanity's continued possession of their world-ending arsenal. Despite the precarious nature of civilization in the atomic age, Isamu plowed on as if the world depended upon his timely arrival. At 1:52 Isamu had successfully traversed the tiny swath of delta on which the Peace Park was situated and was strolling across a bridge spanning the Ota River.

At the end of the bridge, a traffic light directed the flow of vehicles and pedestrians at a four-way intersection. Isamu was directly opposite of where he needed to be, so he rushed up to the crosswalk and impatiently mashed the pedestrian crossing button, receiving a distinct, slightly obnoxious mechanical squeak confirming his input. Isamu tapped his foot in frustration. There were no cars coming or going across the path he needed to cross, however the light refused to change. Pedestrians and cars alike waited in a seemingly never-ending, pointless limbo until finally the yellow light appeared. Isamu checked his watch as he waited for the crosswalk to prompt him for when it was safe to cross. 1:54. He was cutting it close.

“Pedestrian, please safely cross now,” an automated voice chimed. Isamu reflexively darted into the street, flagrantly disregarding any notions of safety or concern for his wellbeing. Concerns not pertaining to his being late to work, on a first day nonetheless, were all impertinent with six minutes and counting left until his shift was supposed to start. Upon reaching the other side, Isamu once again smashed the crosswalk button with impatient fervor and then busied himself by obsessively tapping his foot and periodically checking his watch.

The second hand continued to jump, tick after tick, refusing to show him any mercy in the way of stopping or even slowing down. He begged the kami, pleaded with his ancestors, offered up all forms of self-sacrifice to no avail. In his mind's eye, he envisioned himself atop a massive wristwatch being incessantly chased by the passage of time. Fed up with his rodent-like slavery, Isamu turned and dug his feet into the ground, determined to make a stand against this injustice. One tick. Two tick. With the third tick, the second hand plowed into Isamu's gut and carried him forward to the next moment.

Consigned to his defeat against the implacable laws of space-time, Isamu's foot tapping grew more and more distressed. One minute had passed in his contemplation, and his impending doom became increasingly plausible. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the traffic lights switched from green to yellow and Isamu prepared himself for his last mad dash to his new office. "Pedestrian, please safely cross now." Once again, as soon as those words registered in Isamu's mind, he jolted out into the street refusing to accept his doomed fate.

After his first, solitary step, bright red flashed directly in front of Isamu's face followed by a gust of powerful wind. Instinctively, his body froze while his mind tried to comprehend the myriad of data that assaulted his senses. He turned his head to his left and watched as a compact, red convertible sped onward showing no signs of slowing down. The gripping fear of mortality that had been instilled due to his fight or flight instincts quickly catalyzed into a raging inferno of fury. Isamu tried to make out the license plate, but he was only able to read half the tag before the car turned out of sight at the next intersection.

Unable to take any action against the reckless driver, Isamu took a deep breath and then resumed his travels. Growing concern for his timeliness resurfaced and he flicked his right wrist to bring his watch into view, fearful of what it might say. 1:57. Isamu's leisurely, post-life threatening stroll was instantaneously shifted up to a determined light jog. Priorities once again began to re-align along their pre-existing hierarchies. Punctuality took the forefront in Isamu's thoughts, and all contemplations on mortality were repressed internally and confined to his abyss of blissful ignorance, along with his increasing health concerns and growing nihilistic pessimism.

The *Chugoku Shimbun* headquarters came into view and Isamu rushed inside the doors with a whole minute to spare. A clerk at the front desk greeted him with an inviting smile, but Isamu was forced to wave her off as he gasped, struggling to get enough oxygen. Despite the fact that he had only jogged lightly for less than two minutes, Isamu felt light-headed and weak on his feet. He conveniently plopped himself down into the chairs surrounding the front desk. As he wheezed with no sign of imminent relief, Isamu imagined that this must be what it feels like to be a smoker running a marathon.

As soon as Isamu had the breath to speak, he panted, “Tanaka Isamu... Here.. to see...Chiba...Kazushige.”

The clerk replied, “Yes sir. Do you need me to get you some water?” Isamu shook his head, not wanting to inconvenience her. All he needed was time. Isamu focused on the monumental task of inhaling and exhaling while the clerk called up to Chiba Kazushige’s office. A minute or two passed and Isamu’s breathing steadied. By the time Chiba Kazushige appeared, Isamu was nearly back to normal. He stood, bowed, and said, “Thank you for having me, Chiba Kazushige. I apologize for my tardiness.”

Chiba merely nodded his head and replied, “Don’t worry about it. And please, call me Chiba. Are you ready for the grand tour?”

“Yes sir. Ready when you are.” Chiba nodded in assent, then promptly about-faced and began leading Isamu on the tour of his new workplace.

“You are lucky, Tanaka. You are walking on hallowed ground. The *Chugoku Shimbun* is a veritable historical artifact. Founded on May 5th, 1892, the *Chugoku Shimbun* is celebrating its seventieth anniversary next year,” Chiba piped proudly. “Through thick and thin this newspaper has continued to print headlines. Even after



losing 113 employees, the building, and all our equipment to an atomic bomb, it only took us three days to be operational again.”

Interrupting him in his monologue, Isamu asked, “Were you there for that? The bomb and rebuilding the paper?”

Chiba glanced back at Isamu and flippantly waved him off. “No, I’m not hibakusha, if that’s what you’re asking. I happened to be away on business when the war came to an end. I was lucky. Unlike the 113. Now, to our right is...” Chiba resumed his exposition, determined to enlighten Isamu on the magnificent glory of the *Chugoku Shimbun* and its shining history of civic service in supporting the Japanese people.

As he followed Chiba around learning about anything and everything *Chugoku Shimbun*, Isamu admired the efficiency of the newspaper staff. Men and women in every department bustled and hurried about their business with intense purpose and dedication. Like a well-tuned machine, the offices hummed with the vibrant musicality of productivity. Typewriters clanged and clacked as innumerable keystrokes manifested themselves into stories and headlines. The significance of their operations began to impress itself upon Isamu. He felt his chest filling with awe and excitement. The thought of belonging to such an extensive and well-run organization stoked a pride in him that he had not known existed. Here was his chance to make a significant contribution.

“And here we are,” Chiba gestured. “We have arrived at the humble resting place of Tanaka Isamu.” Chiba stood next to a tiny cubicle containing a typewriter, four pencils, and a solitary notebook.

“Isn’t it a bit morbid to call this my ‘resting place’?” Isamu inquired.

“Yes, it most definitely is.” A smirk lit up Chiba’s face as he explained, “However, we do so to signify the death of the individual. You are part of the collective now. All your worries, problems, previous accomplishments, etc. are all null. They don’t have any significance at the *Chugoku Shimbun*. This is a fresh start. Here you are reborn a *Chugoku* journalist, the best in the business. We expect you to behave as such.” Isamu analyzed Chiba for any traces of humor or lightheartedness in his demeanor regarding that last comment, but there was none. Chiba’s repressive seriousness made Isamu uncomfortable, so he edged past his creepily enthusiastic superior to better look at his tiny excuse for an office.

The cubicle was separated from the rest of the workspace by three flimsy vertical stands that could hardly qualify as walls. Nevertheless, Isamu swelled with pride and gratefulness. He walked up to and ran his hand slowly along his desk. Touching his typewriter, he poked a few keys to hear and feel the visceral pleasure of the keystrokes. A smile shone on his face, as his life seemed to coalesce and make slightly more sense.

Chiba cleared his throat, snapping Isamu out of his bright future fantasies. “So this concludes the tour. Since today was just orientation, you are free to leave. Tomorrow I’ll see you at 8:00 a.m. sharp. Enjoy your last day as Tanaka Isamu, for tomorrow you officially join the ranks of the *Chugoku Shimbun*!”

Isamu chuckled and replied, “Sure thing. I’ll see you tomorrow.” As Isamu navigated back through the labyrinth of the modern office he checked his watch. The tour had taken two hours and it was now 4:14. He had no obligations to be anywhere or do anything tonight. Rather than go back to a near-vacant bachelor's pad, Isamu decided to explore the city before turning in. It had been sixteen years since he had walked through

the streets of Hiroshima, and the Hiroshima that he remembered from childhood no longer existed.

After several minutes and several wrong turns, Isamu sighed in relief as he finally found the building's front exit. Through glass walls and a glass door, Hiroshima buzzed with activity. As he opened the door and emerged from the *Chugoku Shimbun*, a tsunami of stimuli rushed over him. Car horns honked in the distance, the smell of exhaust mixed with the sweet, subtle scent of the brackish river filled his nose, and all manner of color flitted about demanding his undivided attention. Isamu marveled at the beauty of this extraordinarily ordinary moment. Emotions, just as varied and disparate as the stimuli he witnessed, began to surface, despite his best attempts to stifle and repress them.

Before he lost complete control, Isamu turned to his right and began walking with no clear destination in mind. All he knew was that he needed to walk and think. As he aimlessly wandered, his thoughts reverted back to the speeding red convertible that had nearly plowed him into the pavement earlier that day. He chuckled nervously to himself as he finally took the time to realize how close of a brush with death that had been. A few centimeters and a single step was all that had separated Isamu from this world and the next, if a next world even existed. He wondered if luck, the universe's plans, or some guardian angel of some sort had guided and protected him throughout his life. This wasn't the first time a single step had held such significance for Isamu.

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Sixteen years earlier Isamu stood utterly alone surrounded by only Fire and Death. His caretaker, Fujita Otoo, had been buried under the debris of his wooden house, which now crackled as it was consumed by the voracious flames. To his left, only a meter

or so away from him, an unrecognizable mass of flesh and clothing had melded together, becoming indistinguishable from one another. Isamu retched as his mind made the realization that the pile of gore in front of him had been his older brother, Tanaka Kazuo. Only moments earlier, Fujita Otoo had watched on with a smile on his face as Isamu had chased Kazuo around the yard in an innocent game of tag. Isamu had been gaining on Kazuo and had his arm outstretched, prepped for the satisfactory moment of victory when he finally caught his older brother. Then the world had turned red.

Isamu had survived the initial blast with its flesh melting heat. He had been spared from the flying debris that had claimed the lives of thousands. But the radiation...invisible and inescapable...the radiation had come for them all...

Melodious whistling woke Isamu from his nightmarish trance. He closed his eyes as he returned back to the present moment. As he opened them, it took him a second to acclimate himself to his new surroundings. The serene tune spoke of autumn days to be remembered, loneliness, and the tears that threatened to stream down an upturned face. Happiness is beyond the clouds, happiness is beyond the sky, inherently out of reach for a man with the inability to fly.

Captivated by the transcendent music, Isamu decided to explore its source of origin. A music store with a bright neon “open” sign and countless psychedelic band posters stood directly in front of Isamu, beckoning him to enter with promises of soul-freeing music. Having nothing to lose and plenty of time still to spare, Isamu entered the store, unsure of what was about to greet him on the other side. As he pushed open the door, innumerable bells tied to the interior handle rang, notifying the staff of his arrival.

A lady crouched at the front counter with her back turned to him. Instinctively she attempted to greet him starting off with, “Hello, welcome to our sto-” She had been attempting to stand and face him while also balancing in her arms a collection of ceramic bucks and does. Due to her quick maneuvers, she had lost the grip of a solitary buck and it hurtled towards the ground in seeming slow motion. Despite her best efforts to break the fall with her right foot, she merely ended up lightly punting the buck before it resumed its inevitable trajectory and smashed into the floor, breaking into several hundred pieces.

She stood still, shell-shocked from her failure to save the poor ceramic creature. A solitary, soft, “Oops,” was all that she could muster. Moved by her graceful clumsiness, Isamu quickly calculated his next play. Without saying a word, he removed five hundred yen from his wallet (the price of two ceramic figurines as posted on the display), walked up to the counter, and solemnly laid the money out for her to see. He then gently removed a doe from her overburdened arms and deliberately dropped it onto the floor next to the obliterated buck. A second later the doe had burst into several hundred pieces as well.

“Oops,” was all he said as he smiled at her.

“Why did you do that?” she asked in bewilderment.

“I figured he’d be lonely. Now he has a companion for his travels. And I can help you clean up this mess,” he said as he stooped to begin collecting the larger pieces of wreckage. An antler here, the beautiful white of the doe’s tail there, Isamu continued to pick up the pieces while the lady unburdened herself and headed to the back of the store. While she was gone, he slipped the doe tail and antler into his pocket. By the time she returned with a broom and dustpan, Isamu had finished gathering the larger pieces and all

that was left was tiny shards, fragments, and dust. He dumped their collective remains into the trash bin to the right of the counter while the lady swept the finer bits into a unified pile.

As tiny gusts of wind from her broom strokes swirled and eddied the detritus, Isamu couldn't help but remember a quote he had learned in high school when they had briefly studied the Bible. "Ashes to ashes, Dust to dust," he muttered absently. The lady either didn't hear his musings or decided to play it off as if she hadn't as she continued her work. Isamu watched in silence as she finished sweeping their remains into the dustpan, etching every last one of her features into his brain. The way her beautiful black hair fell from her shoulders as she leaned over, her slender white fingers gripping the handle of the dust pan, the subtle indentation in her right cheek that preceded a radiant smile, the vibrance of her bright blue blouse that silhouetted her trim figure, even the elegant, concise movements of each sweeping motion she made were enough to drive Isamu to the brink of madness. He felt his mind slipping away, eclipsed by her entrancing features. And then their eyes met. It was only for a second. Maybe two. And they were red? No, green, green as the country hillside in spring abounding with freshness and life. Isamu had lost himself in their opulence. She looked away and her cheeks flushed red.

With one final stroke she sent the remaining fragments hurtling into the dustpan intermixing with the rest. Indistinguishable from one another, somehow the summation of the buck and doe had become more in their eternal bond. They were irreparably shattered, broken beyond repair, yet Isamu felt that they had somehow become whole. Like puzzle pieces being reunited or the snug fit of a glove on a hand, the fusion of the buck and doe felt natural to Isamu. She stood, walked over to the trash bin, and dumped their

intermixed pieces on top of the bigger chunks Isamu had dropped in earlier. With the ritual complete, the buck and doe were now indivisible on their journey into the unknown.

Finally, the lady turned to Isamu and introduced herself. “Thank you for your help cleaning up. I’m Watanabe Ichiko. And you are?” She said with a cordial smile that warmed Isamu to his very core.

“Tanaka Isamu, pleased to meet you, Watanabe.” He bowed with the utmost reverence.

Watanabe chuckled and replied, “So what can I do for you? Looking for anything in particular?”

“Not really. I think I’m just going to browse and let you get back to your work. Sorry to disturb you.”

“Don’t worry about it. If you need help finding anything, feel free to let me know,” she said, before returning back to her display building, placing the various bucks and does in their sterile habitat. Isamu spent the next five minutes pretending to check out the various records before deciding to head home. He couldn’t get his mind off of Watanabe, and being in her presence, yet unable to say or do anything to convey his feelings and intentions, was driving him insane. He needed time to process and think about his next move. As he left the store, he heard Watanabe say, “Bye! Please come back and visit us again!” While Isamu knew that she was likely talking as a store clerk to a potential future customer, he enjoyed the fantasy that she had genuinely meant that she wanted to see him again.

As he opened the door and once again walked back onto the streets of Hiroshima, Isamu felt lighter. He couldn't put the sensation into words, but somehow it felt as if a burden had been lifted. He didn't feel cursed and his existence wasn't a tragedy. Isamu looked forward to the infinite possibilities of tomorrow as he walked down the street with an upturned face, this time with no tears threatening to stream down them. His eyes caught sight of the beautiful pink and white of a poster advertising the upcoming Hanami festivals. Smiling and confident, Isamu strode into the next moment, unafraid.



## Chapter 2

Standing resolute, two chopsticks clung to one another after being embedded in a bowl of rice. Ichiko's heart raced as she stared at the symbolic taboo which she had just erected. The chabudai had been set with four bowls of rice and three sets of chopsticks laid neatly beside three of the bowls. However, the fourth set, black as the darkest night, stood in stark defiance of Ichiko's will as a tombstone would weather a storm. Deliberately, and in one concise motion, Ichiko unsheathed the chopsticks from their feeble foundation and laid them gently beside her bowl, just like she had set the rest of the table.

Having completed her morning duties of preparing breakfast and setting the table, Ichiko rose from her seat and went to wake everyone else up. She was eternally grateful to her uncle and aunt for their hospitality in allowing her to live with them, so in order to show her appreciation in what little way she could, she cooked the family breakfast every morning and let her aunt sleep in. This was a tradition she had maintained for the past four-and-a-half years since she had left her parents in Kyoto to live with her father's brother's family. Futilely, she had attempted to run from her family's past, but she had quickly discovered that ancestry was inescapable within Japan.

She quietly knocked on her uncle and aunt's room and informed them that breakfast was ready. Then, she turned around and did the same for their son, Watanabe Itaru. Just like every other day before, she dutifully returned back to her seat and waited for them to emerge from their respective bedrooms. In several minutes, all three family

members had gotten dressed and were assembled at the chabudai. “Let’s eat!” They all exclaimed in unison. Ichiko watched on as each family member took up their chopsticks and began mixing the raw egg with the white rice that made up her standard *tamago kake gohan* dish. Itaru was the first to snatch the condiments and, after pouring obscene amounts of soy sauce and dumping truckloads of salt in his bowl, he began devouring his meal with the insatiable appetite of a teenager.

As her uncle and aunt began to consume their meals at a much slower pace than Itaru, Ichiko turned her attention to her own bowl, which remained pure white rice, yet unsullied by the raw egg. Using her black chopsticks once again, Ichiko bore a hole into the center of her bowl, creating a comfortable resting place for her egg. She then picked up the egg she had reserved for herself and skillfully broke its shell on the edge of the chabudai. Lifting the egg directly over the bowl, she inserted her fingers into the weakened shell and tore the whole into halves. As the yolk and egg white congealed in the bowl with the rice, she found herself reflecting on her parent’s relationship. Despite traversing adversity after adversity, and being about as different as an egg is from rice, her mother and father were always smiling in her memories. As she stirred the egg into the rice and they lost their individual identities to form something new, Ichiko wondered if she’d ever have a relationship like her parents.

Foregoing the condiments, Ichiko began absently eating her gohan off in her own introspective world. Noticing her silence, Ichiko’s aunt piped up and asked, “So how are things at the music store?”

Ichiko snapped back to reality, and after taking a moment to register her aunt’s question, replied, “They’re going well. Abe is teaching me a lot about how to run the

business. Yesterday he showed me how we order our inventory and how we pay our suppliers. It's all very interesting, although I still have lots to learn before I'm ready to actually run the store."

"Oh, you'll get there soon enough, I have no doubt about that. Just be diligent and apply yourself to your studies and you'll be running the store all by yourself in no time. Haha, I wouldn't be surprised if you forced old Abe into retirement before the year's end!"

"Oh, I don't know about that," Ichiko replied, unsure of how to handle the overbearing and hyperbolic encouragement. "Running a business is extremely complicated, even despite our small size and single location. I feel like I could dedicate myself to studying this music store for the next five years and I still wouldn't know everything I'd need to know to be successful. It's honestly pretty impressive that Abe ran the whole operation by himself before I came along. I'm not even sure how he pulled it off all those years."

"Has he offered you a raise yet?" Ichiko's uncle joined in.

"No, and I'm not going to ask for one. I haven't learned enough and I don't provide enough value yet to justify the increased expenditure." Ichiko's uncle's face contorted with displeasure, yet he refrained from pursuing the subject any further. It had been clear to Ichiko that he had been unhappy with her rent-free existence in their household for quite some time. While he had tolerated it during her high-school years, after she had graduated and upped her position at the music store to full time he had hinted at her "obligations" to their familial unit more and more often. She had even

overheard their terse conversations behind closed doors where her aunt had defended Ichiko wholeheartedly against her uncle's malicious onslaughts.

Once again, Ichiko withdrew within herself as the conversation ebbed to center on Itaru and his accomplishments in school. As she ate her gohan, she marveled at the beautiful synthesis of eggs and white rice that were stimulating her taste buds. Distinctly different, yet somehow compellingly compatible, Ichiko envied their wonderfully piquant union. Assimilation was all she had ever hoped for. She had wanted to fit into society seamlessly, and despite her differences, add her flavor to help enrich her community and provide them with value. Unfortunately her dreams had not withstood the constant abrasions of reality, and all that was left was a tiny bit of idealistic hope and the desire to be forgotten about and left alone, swept under the rug of an exclusionary society.

As the meal concluded, Ichiko's aunt gathered all the dishes and went about cleaning them. Itaru excused himself to go pack for school, while her uncle trundled out of the dining room without saying a word, yet somehow still conveying his intense disapproval through his gait and demeanor, so much so that he might as well have been screaming at them from the top of his lungs. As soon as his negative energy had left the room, Ichiko let out a sigh of relief, finally allowing herself to breathe again after what seemed like an eternity. "Don't you worry about him, darling." Her aunt spoke without looking up from the task at hand. "He's just under a lot of pressure from work. As that war in Vietnam escalates, Nihon Seiko has increasing pressure to perform. His bosses have placed outrageous demands on him and he comes home every day more and more stressed. He takes it out on you, so I'm not going to ask you to forgive him. I just hope you understand that it's not you that he's upset about."

“I know that. It doesn’t make him any easier to deal with, though,” Ichiko complained, battling her natural reflex to stick her tongue out in disgust. “I guess I need to be getting ready as well. I’ll see you later tonight!” As she bid her aunt goodbye, she rose from her seat, went back to her room, and collected her randoseru, already packed for today’s grand adventures. It had been a gift from her mother and she had absolutely refused to part from it, despite her aunt’s persistent offers to buy her a more age-appropriate purse.

As she was leaving, she caught a glance of herself in the mirror. Her profile emphasized the ambiguities surrounding her identity. The vibrant blue blouse and conservative grey skirt testified to her professionalism and seriousness. However, the obtrusively red randoseru told a different story, one of a childhood not quite yet abandoned. A giggle forced itself to the surface as she gawked at the mixed signals her outfit was sending. Was she a child, or an adult? Schoolgirl or business professional? Ichiko wasn’t even sure she knew the answer to those questions.

All the same, Ichiko plowed onward, allowing her subconscious to guide her from her house to the Hiroden streetcar platform. There she waited patiently for the 8:30 car to make its stop and pick her up. She was a few minutes early, so she stood at the back of the platform trying her best to blend in with the background and thus not draw attention to herself. Despite her best efforts, she apparently stuck out like a sore thumb because it hadn’t been thirty seconds since she had arrived before she heard the wave of whispers begin gossiping about the buraku girl-child who was seen here every morning.

“She’s a burakumin.” A man in a sharp suit and tie whispered to his equally professional friend.

“No way. How do you know?”

“Shimizu thought she was pretty cute, so he asked her on a date once. On the date he asked her where she was from and he said she was vague about it and that she got nervous when he asked, so he got suspicious. He checked her background against the registry, and turns out she’s from a buraku community in Kyoto. He said he never went back to go see her again.”

“Ha, I don’t blame him. Those hinin are nothing but trash collectors and criminals. She had already lied to him about who she was. Who’s to say she wouldn’t lie again?”

As the gossip continued, Ichiko stared at the clock and tried to block it all out. The second hand leisurely made its way around its predetermined course while Ichiko begged it to pick up its pace and ferry her away from here already. Despite her ardent focus on the watch’s second hand and her intensifying daydreams of valiant escape, Ichiko still felt the hateful blows given voice and meaning in language. Terms such as: eta, filth, buraku, worthless, hinin, and animals reached her ears from various directions and in varying intensities. However, no matter where the voice came from and how loudly she heard it, the tone was always the same. Disgust, detestation, loathing and abhorrence synthesized in the whispers of the repugnant commuters.

Finally, to Ichiko’s relief, the Hiroden streetcar made its appearance, right on time. Ichiko allowed the commuters to board in front of her so she wouldn’t risk coming into contact with them and incurring their wrath as a result of being touched by a buraku. Once everyone else had boarded, and the doors were just about to shut, Ichiko rushed to

the middle car and hopped inside just as the doors had begun to close. Once aboard, she looked left and right to find the least crowded car where she would be the most alone.

Before she could make a decision and act on it, the streetcar jerked forward from its standstill and began its voyage into downtown Hiroshima. Being caught off guard and not having her feet solidly planted, Ichiko stumbled into the man in the sharp looking business suit. She immediately yelped a reflexive “Sorry,” however the man glared back at her, obviously not accepting her sincere apology. She inched slowly backward, determined to get as far away from him as possible. He snorted at her defeated demeanor and held up his hand with four fingers extended signifying the animal he saw her as. Ichiko whirled around just in time to prevent him from seeing the tears stream down her cheeks. She bullied her way through to the driver’s car, wiped the tears away with her forearm, and stood in the corner attempting to regain her composure.

As she blinked away the tears, a historical placard at the top of the rail car caught her attention. It read: “Constructed in 1940, this rail car was in service on August 6th, 1945, when Hiroshima first experienced the atomic bomb. Approximately 2,250 meters away from the hypocenter at the time of detonation, the car and its inhabitants suffered minor injuries from the shock wave. After service repairs were made and the rails were cleared, the car was put back into operation a week later helping to facilitate Hiroshima’s rebirth.” For some reason the quote soothed her, and helped her gain control of her emotions. She remembered the American man and his words of encouragement that he had imparted many years ago.

“I am not defined by my birth or my class,” Ichiko muttered under her breath. “I will blaze my own path. I am not defined by my birth or my class...”

By the time the streetcar had pulled into her station two stops later, Ichiko had completely regained her composure and was ready to face the day anew. She had dealt with this discrimination since as long as she could remember and she was determined not to let it beat her. When the all clear was given and the doors opened, Ichiko strode out onto the platform with her head held high. She had decided that she was going to have a good day, and that's all there was to it. Nobody and nothing was going to get in the way of that goal.

Reinvigorated, Ichiko made record time getting from the streetcar station to the music store. It was 8:45 when she walked in the door of Abe's Music Store a whole fifteen minutes early. Abe heard the lucrative bells chime and thus lumbered out from the back, calling out with his booming bass of a voice, "Welcome to our store!" When he laid his eyes on Ichiko, he seemed to deflate, having been robbed of a potential sale. "Oh, it's just you. I wasn't expecting you for another..." He checked his wrist watch, "ten minutes at least."

Ichiko smiled and replied, "Haha, don't look so happy to see me now." Abe Kazuma could be rough around the edges, but he was one of the very few people who knew about Ichiko's familial history and didn't seem to care one bit about her being a burakumin. When she had finally told him, after several months of indecision and worry about when he was going to find out, he had merely shrugged and told her that he had already known. Since then he's never made mention of it again and Ichiko had never had any reason to bring it back up.

"Well, let's get to work, Ichiko. Another day another yen, am I right?" He chuckled at what he thought had been an ingenious play on the American saying. Ichiko



just rolled her eyes and followed him to the back of the store as he slowly stomped his way to his office. Abe was a massive man, to say the least. He was remarkably tall, at least six foot, if Ichiko had to guess. Yet, despite his height, he was still stout, carefully walking the tightrope between fit and overweight. Ichiko assumed that in a few more years his indomitable appetite would push him unambiguously over that threshold, but for now it seemed like his metabolism had been able to stave off the inevitable.

Upon arriving in his office, he stiffly plopped down into his office chair with a distinct thud that made even Ichiko wince with sympathy pain. “Now, do you remember everything I taught you yesterday about how we handle our inventory?” He pressed on, seemingly unphased.

“Yes, I believe so. We got a new shipment today, huh?” Ichiko replied.

Abe nodded in assent. “I’m going to leave the stocking to you. Get our product out on the floor during the downtimes in between customers. I’ll be back here if you need anything.” Ichiko bowed and then left him to his work. Her first priority was to check the invoice to see how much inventory they had gotten. Ichiko gawked at the mountainous stack of twenty-five boxes that towered over her in receiving. Twenty boxes of records and five boxes of miscellaneous knick-knacks and other accessories. Ichiko quickly realized that stocking was going to take her all day.

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Seven hours later, Ichiko had discovered that her estimate had been horribly inaccurate. It was already 4 o’clock, two hours away from closing, and she was only on her sixteenth box of records out of the twenty she had started with. Five boxes of knick-knacks and accessories still remained on top of that. She had tried her best to get it all

done in one day, however they had been unusually busy and she was still trying to master the new layout of the store. Two weeks ago, Abe and Ichiko had rebuilt the store's organization from top to bottom to include more American bands and their Japanese cover counterparts due to their increasing popularity.

Ichiko hummed along with the Andrew Sisters as they sang about the woes of civilization, while she picked up the last record of the sixteenth box and neatly placed it on the shelf. As she took the cardboard box back to receiving, she decided to switch it up and start getting some of the knick knacks out on the floor as well. She needed a break from the mental exercise of trying to figure out this new layout that was still very much foreign to her. Nine boxes remained, and she was determined to knock out a few more before she had to leave tonight.

Gracefully, and with the epitome of satisfaction, Ichiko smiled as her scissors glided through the packing tape with uninhibited ease. She lifted the flaps of the box and was confronted by forty figurines surrounded by wrapping paper. As she unwrapped one of the replicas, she beheld a beautiful and powerful looking buck with a commanding rack asserting its dominance. It appeared as if he had been peacefully grazing, but had heard a sudden noise that was a premonition of danger. His head was cocked to the side as if analyzing his surroundings, his thick muscles tensed and ready for immediate action. However, he had been captured in that moment, forever searching, but never finding. Forever in fear, yet unable to dart away and escape the inescapable.

She set the buck down and began unwrapping the next figurine, which happened to be that of a graceful doe grazing in an isolated meadow. Her flanks had been painted with white spots surrounded by her light brown coat. Despite the seemingly peaceful

environment that the doe inhabited, Ichiko noticed that the doe's eyes were wide open, somehow conveying a hyper-awareness and wariness of her surroundings. The doe was always on the lookout for danger, for threats to her existence, real or otherwise. Even though a doe's life was constantly in danger from predators, Ichiko envied the simplicity of the doe's existence. Eat, sleep, run, and reproduce, were all the imperatives of a deer's life. They were unencumbered by the worries and realities that civilization breeds.

With a sigh, she began unwrapping the rest of the figurines in the box with delicacy and care. When she had unwrapped ten of them, she gathered them in her arms and walked back out to the front of the store. She had begun to place them neatly on display next to the cash register when she heard the distinctive ring of the welcome bells from the front door. Slightly startled due to the unexpected stimuli that had rocked her out of her inner thoughts, she whirled around and blurted out the standard store greeting. In her quick maneuvers, she had felt the distribution of the figurines shift in her arms and one of them escaped her grasp. She reflexively shot out her foot to intercept the doomed buck's trajectory and break its fall. However, she merely ended up kicking the buck slightly up into the air before it cratered back down to the ground again circumscribed by the inexorable law of gravity.

The crunch of crumbling ceramic rang in Ichiko's ears and the sight of the shattered buck shook something in Ichiko's core. She remembered the putrid smell of blood, the rank permeation of death, waiting right around the corner. As she had peered through the bushes, one summer day in Kyoto, Ichiko caught sight of a curious collage of colors. Bright and dark red, intermixed with orange, grey and white, all poured forth from the gaping wound of a dying deer. She remembered being afraid and wanting to look

away, shut her eyes, and forget what she had saw. She stood at odds with herself, because, instead of running away, Ichiko had crept through the bushes and kneeled next to the dying beast. She cradled its head, stroked its pelt, and sang it a lullaby as it entered its eternal slumber.

“Oops,” was all Ichiko was able to mutter. The man, initially taken back by Ichiko’s graceful performance, seemed to regain his composure as he strode confidently forward. Ichiko stared on in bewilderment as the man produced his wallet, pulled out 500 yen, and placed the money on the counter. Then, he turned to Ichiko and carefully eased a doe out from the top of her arms. To her surprise, he deliberately dropped the doe onto the tiled floor, letting it splinter into several hundred pieces, just like the buck before it.

A vibrant smile lit up his face as he uttered a solitary, assured, “Oops,” in playful imitation of Ichiko.

Unsure of how to react, Ichiko inquired, “Why did you do that?”

“I figured he’d be lonely.” The man replied. “Now he has a companion for his travels. And I can help you clean up this mess.” With that, the man stooped down on one knee and began collecting the bigger chunks of debris. Still unsure of how to proceed, Ichiko instinctively unloaded the rest of the figurines on the counter and headed to the back of the store to find the broom and dustpan. When she had returned, the man was just finishing picking up the last of the larger fragments. Ichiko felt the inner mechanisms of her being begin to turn. This man intrigued her, with his curiously confident demeanor. Despite his emaciated state and small stature, Ichiko saw strength and indefatigable hope within him and she envied his optimism.

As she emerged from the back, the man stood and dumped his collection of buck and doe body parts into the trash bin. Ichiko set herself to the task of sweeping up the final bits of debris left over from this seemingly inconsequential tragedy. She wondered if the world had changed forever due to the destruction of the buck and doe. Would they be missed? Were the events of history forever altered due to their absence? Or did they matter at all?

Lost in thought, Ichiko was nearly finished with unifying all the dust piles, when she noticed the man intently staring at her. Unintentionally, their eyes met as Ichiko was unable to resist the pull of their affectionate gaze. Bright, beautiful, light brown eyes stared directly into her soul. Ichiko felt naked in their meeting, so she broke eye contact after only a second of their union. She blushed as she swept the unified dust pile into the dust pan. Then, effectively erasing all evidence of the buck and doe's brief existence and tragic end, Ichiko poured the last of their remains into the trash can.

Finished with the cleanup, Ichiko turned around and introduced herself to the man. "Thank you for your help cleaning up. I'm Watanabe Ichiko. And you are?"

"Tanaka Isamu. Pleased to meet you, Watanabe." The man bowed deeply as if to someone of high seniority or ranking above him.

Ichiko laughed uncomfortably and replied, "So what can I do for you? Looking for anything in particular?"

"Not really. I think I'm just going to browse and let you get back to your work. Sorry to disturb you."

"Don't worry about it. If you need help finding anything, feel free to let me know." Ichiko subsequently busied herself with setting up the rest of the display to hide

her embarrassment and anxiety in front of Tanaka. She wasn't sure how to handle the situation. However, she was sure that she hadn't handled it well up to this point. Finally, after a few minutes of overwhelming embarrassment, Tanaka headed for the door. As he left, Ichiko yelled after him, "Bye! Please come back and visit us again!" While this was the standard farewell Ichiko was expected to extend towards customers, she couldn't help but be sincere in the hope that their paths would cross again.

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