

PART ONE

Jacaranda Street

Once you leave Japan, it is extremely unlikely that you will return, unless your husband is stationed there again or becomes wealthy.

Take a few reminders of Japan with you, if you have room. Or make arrangements to write to a caring relative who is willing to send you letters or items from your homeland. This can ease homesickness.

And be sure to tell your family, "Sayonara."



—from the chapter "Turning American,"
in TAMIKO KELLY AND JUN TANAKA, *How to Be an American Housewife* (1955)

One

I had always been a disobedient girl.

When I was four, we lived in a grand house with a courtyard and a koi fishpond. My father worked as a lawyer and we were still rich, rich enough to have beautiful silk dresses and for me to have dolls with real hair and porcelain faces, not the corn-husk dolls I played with later.

We even had a nanny to help my mother. One day, Nanny told me she was taking my baby brother and me on a picnic. We walked for what seemed like miles, until my small feet were blistered. In those days, people expected more from a four-year-old than they do now.

“Where are we going?” I asked Nanny.

“To rest from the heat,” she said. “By a pond.”

I did not like Nanny. I didn’t trust how she eyed my brother, Taro, like he was the last bowl of rice. She always hugged him tight, so tight he wailed, like she wanted to absorb him into her body. She had never had a son of her own, only daughters. Sometimes she called Taro “my little peach,” like he was the

peach boy out of the old fairy tale, granted as a wish to the old woman.

I told my mother that Nanny made me uncomfortable. She dismissed it as the whining of a spoiled child. "You don't like Nanny because she makes you behave," Mother said. "Now go with her. I have business in town, and your father is busy, too."

Nanny was old and had a crippled leg; she moved slowly. We stopped by a tree-shaded pond to play and have lunch. Afterward, in the high-noon heat, she took us under a willow tree to nap. Day turned to night. I awoke with a start to see the moon rising above the fields. "Where are we?" I asked.

"Shush," Nanny said soothingly, smoothing my bangs back. "We're going on a trip to my hometown." She looked down the road as though waiting for someone, or something. Her eyes glittered black onyx in the dim light. Taro began wailing and Nanny stuck a bottle into his mouth. "Go back to sleep, Shoko-chan."

Something was not right. We had missed supper. Mother didn't allow us to stay outside past dark. I stood. "You take us home right now!" I screamed.

"Sit down, sit down," Nanny said, trying to push on my shoulders. "You bad girl, listen to Nanny."

"No!" I kicked her in the shin as hard as I could, then pushed Taro's pram back up the road. I knew the way home, even though it was far.

Nanny's hand grabbed my arm and she lifted me up. Now she looked like a terrible witch, her wiry white hair free of her scarf, her jagged teeth bared like a wolf. "We're going on a trip. You must listen to Nanny!"

I bit her hand, bearing down hard in desperation. She

yowled and dropped me. I stood up and pushed Taro away again.

This time she didn't follow. I looked back once and saw her standing in the middle of the road, holding her hand. Taro wailed.

Mother and Father were outside the wall of our house, looking left and right. They'd sent servants out looking for us. When they heard Taro, they ran to meet us. "Where have you been?" Mother cried, sweeping me up. Father cradled Taro to his face. Taro quieted.

"I told you she was no good!" I said, and recounted what had happened.

Some mothers would have not believed their child, but mine did. Mother said she had tried to steal us. Or, at the very least, steal my brother. Who knows what she would have done with me. "If it weren't for Shoko," Mother would retell visitors, shaking her head, "*Ai!*"

I was a hero. All because I wouldn't listen.

WITHIN A YEAR OR SO AFTER THAT, Father tired of dealing with bad people in his business. "Too much cheating," he told my mother. "All anyone cares about is money. Money is God."

He was always so busy. Perhaps he felt guilty that a nanny had almost made off with his children. He decided to sell the house and his practice and become a priest in the Konkokyo, the Konko Church.

In 1859, there was a Japanese village where people feared a god called Konjin, who brought misfortune. One farmer named Kawate Bunji had a streak of bad luck. Once when

Bunji fell very ill, he was visited by the god Konjin, who told him that people shouldn't fear him, that he was good, and that his real name was Tenchi Kane no Kami, "One True God of Heaven and Earth." When Bunji became well, word of his visit from Konjin spread. People came to the farmer Bunji for help, and Tenchi Kane no Kami would speak through him. Bunji's name became Konkokyo Daijin, and he became a god, too. The Konko Church was born.

Mother never made a word of complaint when Father became a priest. Instead, she sold the house and all of our fine possessions, bargaining a more than fair price—"It goes to the church and brings you honor, what more could you wish?" she told the buyer. She let me keep one doll, my Shirley Temple with curly hair Father had bought in Tokyo, the one that melted later when I left it too close to the fireplace.

We moved to a tiny house with dirt floors covered by tatami mats. It was near the church in Ueki where my father would serve as priest. My sister, Suki, who was born that year, never knew a different life. I think that was why she was such a happy person. Or maybe it was because our parents never acted differently, rich or poor. Mother always made arrangements of flowers to brighten the room. We celebrated the festivals, with a little less feasting. Only I, with my memories of dolls and dresses, felt resentment.

Taro and I always played together. We were good friends until it began to bother Taro that I could hit a ball farther than he could, or climb a higher tree, or beat him in every race.

When Father decided I was too old to be a tomboy, around age thirteen, he made me take dance lessons, like all young ladies did. I did what my father told me to do. I was disobedient,

not foolish. I learned how to flip open a fan with a flick of my wrist, peering over it at the audience. I also learned the shamisen, which was a little harp. The teacher said I was a beauty, and very talented. I didn't quite believe her until I saw how the men watched me at our talent show.

I came onstage in my beautiful silk kimono and red lips as my teacher played her shamisen. The bulbs shone in my eyes, but I would not squint. I lowered my gaze and snapped open my fan as I launched into the dance.

I heard an intake of breath from the men. I looked up and saw their admiring gazes fixed on me. I blushed, and kept on, knowing that wherever I went onstage their stares would follow. The other girls became invisible. I had more power in dance than I did at baseball.

I understood then that my skills in school or in sports would not make my life come about in the way I wished. I took my bows at that recital, vowing I would learn what I needed and make the best marriage possible.

THE WAR HAD CHANGED my life's direction from East to West. I heard about Pearl Harbor from my father. I was in third grade. Father, a priest in a religion that believed in peace, was worried. "America is so big," he fretted. "They will destroy us."

Mother reassured him. "If the Emperor says we will win, it will be fine. Japan is mighty."

Father seemed to be the only one around who questioned the Emperor. Everyone else thought we would triumph easily and show the West how strong we were. Even Father dared

not bad-mouth the Emperor in public. The Emperor was supposed to be a god, and to say anything to the contrary could land you in prison.

At first, the war stayed far away, something we knew only from the radio. Then we began having blackouts and sirens. We built shelters in the hillsides to hide in when the planes came.

“Why would they bother with a countryside village, with no targets except chickens?” Father said.

But they did. One night, the alarms went off and we blacked out our windows so the planes wouldn’t have easy targets. “It’s just a drill,” Father told us. We didn’t bother to go out to the shelters.

But then we heard a dull drone, the bombers overhead.

A blast rumbled the house. Something had been destroyed. At first light, I went outside. Our neighbor, Mrs. Miyama, and her little boy had been using their outhouse, and the light had been a beacon. Just like that, they were gone.

Another time, Taro, Suki, and I were walking to school. It was fall, the air just turning cold, the sky still gray. We had on our navy-blue-and-white school uniforms, our nice shoes that we could wear only to school. I remember that Taro’s hair was slicked down as flat as Mother could get it.

Our road went through farmland, a country road with country people, nothing of any significance. Nothing that the Americans should bother with. Suddenly we heard the roar of a fighter plane. It was deafening. Suki stopped and clapped her hands over her ears. Father had told me what to do.

“Drop!” I ordered, pulling my sister to the ground and falling on top of her. Taro fell, too.

There were popping noises and the brown dirt in front of us lifted. We were being shot at. Three little children. I put my head down and prayed that we would be all right. The plane flew past and I started to get up.

The noise returned as the plane turned around. "It's coming back!" Taro yelled. He grabbed my arm, I grabbed Suki's arm, and we jumped over an embankment into an irrigation ditch at the side of the road. I looked up and saw the pilot and the plane as it came low. It had a star on its side, a skull and crossbones on the tail, and a half-naked woman painted near the front. The pilot saw me and laughed. He had been playing with us, scaring us. If he had wanted to, he could have killed us. That was the first time I ever saw an American.

Suki's face and body were muddy, and she was wailing. I took a chunk of mud out of her pigtails. Taro stood up and kicked at the dirt embankment, causing a slew of pebbles to fall down. He shook his fist toward the plane. "We will kill you all!" he shouted. "American fiends!"

I HAD NOT THOUGHT of this story for years.

I sat up on the couch in my San Diego living room, where I had been napping. Bright morning light made the room uncomfortably warm.

When I had told this story to my daughter, Sue, when she was still young enough to ask for stories, she had looked at me as if I were telling a grim fairy tale. "Why would they do that?" she had whispered, her eyes big.

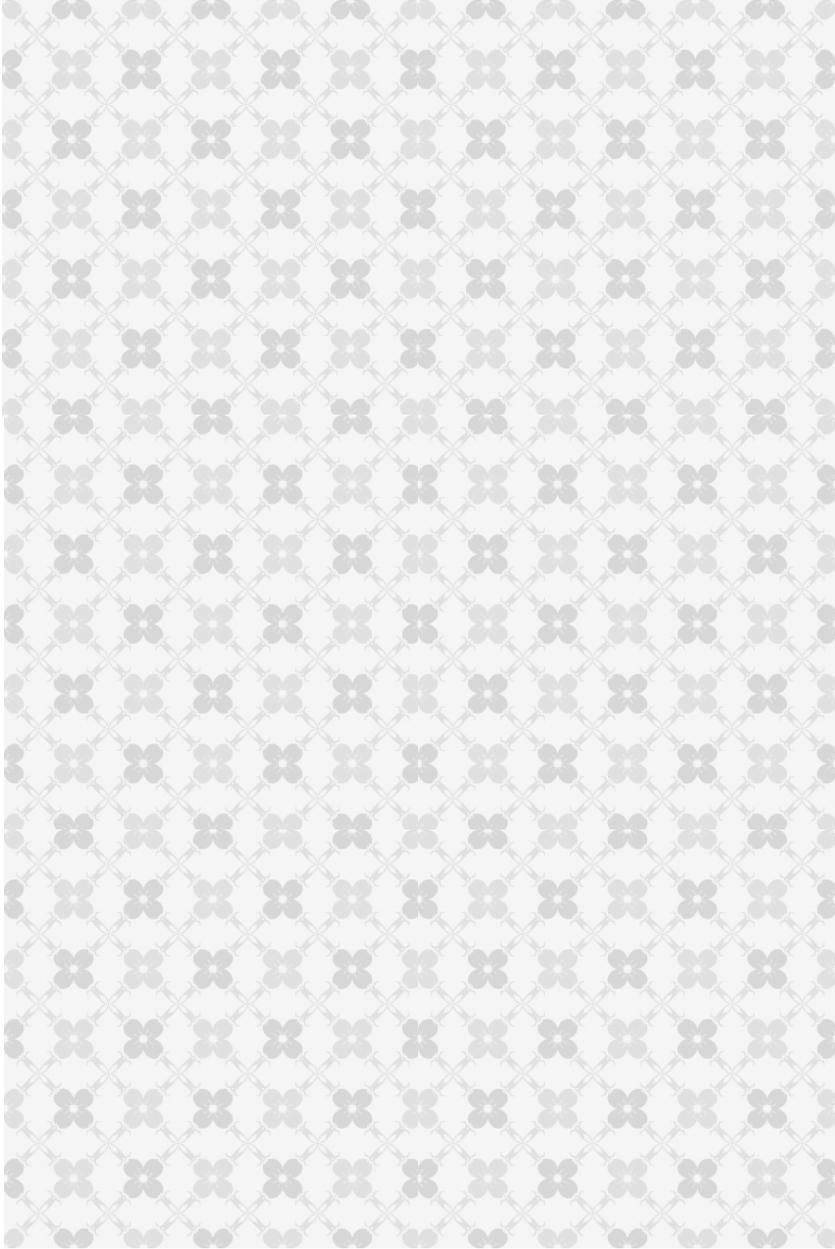
"Those stories scare her," my husband, Charlie, had said. "The past is past."

He was right. And so I hardly talked about my past at all to my daughter. It was a lifetime ago. I had grown tired of my own stories, even of my old dreams. What good did dreams do me now? When you are young, dreams are the reason you pray for a new year and better luck.

Except for this. This one small dream of mine.

Taro and I together again.

I got a piece of tissue-thin airmail stationery and my husband's fountain pen out of the desk drawer. Sitting down on the floor at the coffee table, I put the pen to my lips, thinking. From the garage, Charlie sang as he put laundry in the washer. One of my adult son Mike's cats meowed at the screen door. I began my letter to Taro.



Many American husbands enjoy traditional aspects of Japanese culture, including the o-furo and the massage.

American husbands expect their Wives to be well-versed in massage as a Japanese tradition. Many men find that a small Japanese wife is an asset when she walks on his back after a long, tiring day.

Often when a Japanese person begins consuming Western foods, they become fat. Do not overindulge. It is important to keep oneself at a light enough weight so that the husband's back is uninjured.

The o-furo may also be enjoyed by your husband. Offering to scrub his back as you would with a Japanese spouse is likely to be welcomed. It is a small piece of service you may offer to him.



—from the chapter "A Map to Husbands,"

How to Be an American Housewife

Two

I carried the letter into my bedroom, pushing the door shut with my shoulder. We had lived here for over thirty years, and still this bedroom door was not fixed. I looked about for a place to hide the letter. Not that my husband, Charlie, was nosy, but he always thought of reasons to say no to me.

I stuck the note into my underwear drawer in the dresser. I met the eyes of the two Japanese samurai dolls in their glass case on top of the bureau. The man had a sword, and the girl had a tiny metal knife tucked into her kimono sleeve. A secret weapon no one saw. Underneath their case I had a secret of my own.

I opened the little glass door and lifted out the dolls, then lifted up a hidden compartment. Inside that was my *hesokuri*, my secret money. I'd been pinching pennies all these years. Stealing out of Charlie's change jar, saving bits of our tax refunds and Charlie's Navy retirement checks. Now I had a lot. Enough to go to Japan. I touched the cash and smiled.

Then I opened my closet to decide what to wear to see

my cardiologist, Dr. Cunningham. Lately, I had been seeing him too much, getting tests and medications. My heart was giving out, and other things along with it. Last summer, I'd gotten Bell's palsy, paralyzing my face's right side for a week. I got a patch, like a pirate, so my eye wouldn't dry out. People crossed the street when they saw me coming. Once, they would have crossed the street to look at me.

"I ugly now," I said to Charlie more than once, just to hear him tell me I was beautiful.

He didn't disappoint. "You're beautiful still, Shoko."

"Why this happen?" I asked.

"No one knows," he said. "Only God."

Only God. I prayed to *kamisama*, not God, as my parents had raised me. I sighed and took out a pair of slacks I had worn the previous week, wondering if Dr. Cunningham would recognize them.

Unlike many of the new doctors at Balboa Naval Medical Center, where the doctors who just graduated from medical school go for training, Dr. Cunningham seemed to know what was going on.

I liked Dr. Cunningham. He looked just like Tyrone Power, a movie star I had loved when I was young. And he was single! If I had been young and single, I could have gotten him for sure. When I was in my teens, I'd been the prettiest girl around. High defined cheekbones, Cupid's bow of a full mouth, shiny blue-black hair, and pale white skin, like a baby's. I had an hourglass shape even with no girdle—a full bust, tiny waist (twenty-two inches), and womanly bottom. Men chased me from the time I turned twelve. And I enjoyed it, though being a nice girl, I shouldn't have.

My own daughter was as enchanting, if not more so. She didn't have short Japanese legs like I did. Her limbs were long and lean, her neck and fingers graceful. Eurasians were exotic, and men liked that, too. Sue could have had anyone, if she'd only waited for college before finding a husband, instead of marrying the first boy who came along. Which did not last, as I knew it would not.

I said to Dr. Cunningham, "My daughter could marry anyone, you know. Rich businessmen love her."

And then Dr. Cunningham said, "If she's half as lovely as you, Mrs. Morgan, I'm missing out." He was so nice!

I picked up the phone by the bed now and dialed Sue's cell phone, hoping she wouldn't see my number and let it go to voice mail. I held my breath, waiting. She picked up. "What's up, Mom?" She sounded artificially cheerful. I imagined her sitting at her desk, twirling her dark brown hair around one finger, her pale face greenish in the light from her computer screen.

"Suiko-chan. You wanna take me doctor today?" I asked. "Got appointment after lunchtime."

I heard her carefully repressed sigh. "Is Dad busy?"

"Don't know. Maybe so." I couldn't tell her that Charlie had taken me yesterday and the day before that. I didn't want to worry her.

"I have a meeting, Mom." Sue was a manager at a financial services firm. Her voice turned brisk. "Are you still trying to get me to meet your doctor?"

I was glad she couldn't see the surprise on my face. If I could have, I would have chosen a husband for Sue. Sue needed someone already established, who had done all the hard work

already. She needed someone to take care of her, so the dark circles under her eyes would go away.

Dr. Cunningham would be perfect. But in America, they find husbands themselves. I had found Charlie myself, almost American-style, and maybe I would have done things differently if I could go back.

“He’s not interested, Mom,” Sue said, her voice so flat it made my heart ache even more. “He’s being polite. What’s he supposed to say? Don’t bother the man.”

“But you need *see* this guy. If I you, I grab him up! Single doctor won’t last long.” I tried to keep my voice light, but my daughter didn’t understand. A single doctor really wouldn’t last long.

Sue snorted. “Mom, please. I can find my own man.”

But she couldn’t.

I heard what she was saying. *Stay out of my life.* I sat for a moment in silence. *I am writing a letter to your uncle now,* I wanted to tell her. *I am going to Japan. Don’t you want to know?* I wanted to tell her so much more.

Dr. Cunningham had told me my heart was getting flabby, which meant it wasn’t working well. He wanted me to have surgery with a specialist. They would cut a wedge out and make it smaller. “It’s risky, but not as risky as a transplant,” he had said.

“Fine,” I had said. It took them months to schedule anything. I’d be to Japan and back before the first pre-op appointment.

“Is there something else, Mom?” Sue was trying to sound patient but not succeeding.

I tried to think quickly of something that would make

her want to come with me. My daughter was too sensitive, too fast to hear criticism. Perhaps it was partially my fault.

I did not have the knack of subtlety. When she was a college sophomore, Sue had come to me while I was in my bedroom one afternoon. She squeaked the door closed, her face so pale, even in the golden light coming in from the west, that I thought she was ill. She sat on my side of the bed, next to the photo of my parents. "What's a matter you, Suiko-chan?" I asked her.

"Craig and I are going to move in together," she whispered.

I was shocked. I shouted at her. "You do that," I said, "and we no pay college no more! You bring shame on us." In my town, my family would never have been able to show their faces again if I had done something so scandalous.

Sue had looked around. "Shame from whom? We don't have any family here. The neighbors don't care." The afternoon sun made her hair glint red. "Besides, you're hardly paying anything. I have a ton of loans."

"I no can hold my head up." I was really hoping this would make her ditch Craig.

She had sighed. Nineteen years old, she was at the peak of her beauty. She thought her beauty would go on forever. The way I thought mine would. She needed to find someone better while she still could. "Then it's Plan B. We're getting married."

"Marry?" I closed my eyes and changed my tactics. My lovely daughter could not marry this person, the first boy she'd ever kissed. I had told her that you should only kiss if you were going to get married, but that was to keep her from being a slut. I never thought she'd take it so seriously. "Why you gonna

marry same guy you drag around high school? That's why we send college. Find good man marry."

"There's nothing wrong with Craig." Sue's voice rose in anger.

She was right. There was nothing wrong with him. Except he would make a lousy husband. Too flighty, too artistic. High-maintenance. Maybe in twenty years he'd be ready. "Sue," I pleaded.

"Don't worry. I'll be out of your hair in a week," she spat, leaving the house. "I won't shame you anymore." The next weekend, she was in Vegas. Too young to drink but old enough to get married. And to have a baby.

I never said a bad word about Craig again, no matter what he did or how he acted.

Sue thought differently than I did, and I didn't understand her. Sometimes I thought I had chased her out of the house too soon, been too hard on her the way I had been too easy on her brother. It seemed both parenting methods had failed.

On the line with my daughter, I heard another beep. "Mom, my boss is calling me," Sue said. "Is there anything else you needed?"

It wasn't the right time to tell her everything. Not on the phone. "Go, then." I hung up. I suspected her boss wasn't on the phone, that she was simply tired of listening to her old mother. But she couldn't keep the honcho waiting.

I got dressed. In my bedroom, I had crammed pieces of Japan everywhere, all covered up. There was a hand-painted folding screen by the closet, wrapped in black trash bags. Scrolls and fans were in boxes in the closet. I didn't want anything to

be ruined by the light, not until I could take them out again. When the kids took their junk out of the other bedrooms, I would make a Japanese room.

These things used to be displayed, treasured. When Charlie first brought me from Japan to Norfolk, I decorated our home to the best of my ability, with my Japanese furniture that Charlie and I had taken equal delight in picking out and that the Navy had shipped over: the Japanese screen painted with a waterfall and peacocks; ink-painted scrolls; statues of badgers and lions; and silk satin floor cushions I'd made. We had a sofa, too, but no one used it. With Mike a baby, the floor was more convenient.

Once a week, I'd go to the park and clip whatever foliage and flowers I could find, arranging them in the Japanese way on the sideboard. A tall piece, a medium-size piece, and a small, all designed to suggest nature.

We had lived in a small two-bedroom town house with floors so crooked, you could roll a Coke can from one end to the other. Charlie was getting ready to ship out for at least a year, and it would be just me and the baby.

Charlie's relatives lived in Maryland, and they came to visit a few times. His mother, Millie, a stout woman who had borne eight children in ten years, was so encouraging that I thought all Americans would be like her. "Don't you marry her and then get rid of her like everybody else," she took Charlie aside and warned. Many Japanese women who married servicemen got abandoned when they got to the States and they found out how hard it was to live in a biracial marriage. Even more got left back in Japan, pregnant and unmarried.

“Don’t worry,” Charlie said.

“You call if you need anything, and I’ll get someone to take me here,” his mother said every time she left.

“Yes, Mother.” I knew I would never bother her.

When she visited, she would bring me practical things, like boxes of tissue or a frying pan. I was grateful, but not when she looked around our small apartment.

It was different from her house, where nobody took off their shoes and they would rather use bricks and boards for shelving than spend money on furniture, and the only decorations were pictures of Jesus. If she had flowers, she stuck them all in a vase so big you couldn’t see the other person at the table.

“This is all so fancy,” Millie said every time she visited, trying to understand but not succeeding.

This way of living was the only way I knew. I couldn’t live in a space without having something lovely to look at. Even when my parents were poor, they could still trim a pine bush outside into a bonsai. I imagined Millie went home and talked about how Charlie’s wife spent all his money on unimportant clutter.

Charlie enjoyed Japanese art, though. I tried to teach him *sumi-e* brush painting, but no matter how much he practiced, his paintings looked like rudimentary stick figures. “How you get a few strokes to look like a deer—you’re a genius,” he said to me.

I only knew what a “genius” was from his awed tone. “Try again.”

“There’s only room for one genius here.” He had three of my paintings matted and framed, and they hung in a trio on the wall.

Adjusting to the U.S. was difficult in other ways for me, especially in the beginning. If I borrowed an egg from a neighbor, I returned two, the Japanese way. They didn't understand; why did I give them two? It made them angry, like I was insulting them. When you "borrowed" an egg or a cup of sugar in America, you never actually returned it. Charlie had to explain: "It's her tradition."

"Never heard of a tradition like that," our neighbors said.

When Charlie wasn't home to explain my odd ways to people, I went to the store alone, with Mike bundled up in a thousand layers in his stroller. I made sure to dress up. My favorite outfit was a pencil skirt, button-up black blouse with white pipe trim, and heels. It wasn't the most comfortable thing to take care of a child in, but I was young and didn't care. I wanted to look presentable, not like a maid or a Jap with buckteeth and wild hair, but an American girl.

As I walked the two blocks from housing to the store, people stopped and stared, whispering, "There goes that Jap wife!" I smiled and waved, even when mothers held their children against them. A few of them stopped me, said hello, wanted to touch my hair, so much coarser than theirs. "Like horsehair!" they exclaimed.

I reminded myself that the Japanese had done the same thing with Charlie and his fire-red hair. "There goes the demon!" they had whispered. Certainly I could take it.

I kept my head high and said, "Hello!" I had practiced my *I* sounds in the mirror before I ever left Japan. It didn't matter whether people said hello back or not. I was holding up my end. What they did was their own business.

I SWUNG MY LEGS up onto the bed and massaged my ankle, wishing I could run for miles, like Sue could. I remembered how it felt not to get winded. When I was a kid, I had been a real tomboy. “Stay inside, Shoko,” Father had said to me. “Your skin will get dark.”

But I loved to play baseball, and I hit the ball better than the boys. I still loved baseball today. I watched every game I could on television, making Charlie grumble. He hated sports. I hated being indoors, but now allergies and the sun bothered me too much to spend time outside.

Once, when I was little, I sneaked out to the field where my brother played ball with his friends. “Go home and do the laundry, Shoko,” Taro yelled at me when he saw me. His friends laughed and Taro drew himself up taller than he was, which was still half a head shorter than me. His black hair poked out crazily from under his ball cap; Taro had an unfortunate double-helix cowlick on the crown of his head. “We don’t want girls messing up our game.”

I couldn’t let my little brother speak that way to me, especially in front of his older friend, Tetsuo, who always looked at me in a sly way and winked. I squared my shoulders. “I bet you your *manju* that I hit a home run.” Our mother was making the steamed sweet bean cakes. Treats were getting fewer these days, so this was a bet of the utmost seriousness.

Of course I did hit a homer. Tetsuo and the other boys hooted and hollered. And Taro ran home and told our father, who beat me with a willow stick. “For being better than a boy?” I had shouted at him as he did it.

“For disobedience,” Father had said, giving me an extra whack for talking back. Father, a tall and skinny scholar with glasses falling down his nose, hardly had the heart to give me a good beating. He did it only because it was the right thing for a father to do when a daughter ran wild.

Worst of all, he gave Taro my *manju*. But that night, after everyone had gone to sleep, I’d been awakened by a soft prodding on my cheek and the smell of sweet beans at my nose. “Here, Shoko-chan,” Taro had whispered. “I’m sorry.” He had given me two, his and mine.

“You better be sorry,” I had responded, stuffing both into my cheeks. “I’ll really fix you next time.” I punched his arm. Taro giggled, and we drifted to sleep, the *manju* beans making my lips sticky.

Was Taro even still alive?