**Chapter 1**

**Ashibumi**

“Of course, you never met my Aunt.”

Hiroshi’s English was impeccable. Probably because it was patched together from textbook phrases like ‘Hiroshi’s English was impeccable’ or ‘Of course, you never met my Aunt’. Of course I’d never met his freaking aunt. I hadn’t long since met him, and this was the first time he had admitted to having any sort of relative.

“Quite a character. A very nice person.”

“Mm?”

“Although, as a matter of fact, she had some odd habits. We felt it might be because of her experiences in the war. She lost all her family you know, except for my father. She was almost killed herself. A real survivor. She never spoke about it, certainly not to us children.”

The yellow-stained fingertips strayed upwards to his mouth, but finding no cigarette, settled on his tie instead and unnecessarily re-arranged it.

“To us, she was just Auntie Mie who bought us shaved ice with syrup in the summer, or cakes in the winter and presents on our birthdays. In fact she lived a perfectly normal life most of the time. She could be very, determined, but very humorous also, more . . . *uninhibited* than most people.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Oh, we kids adored her. But the presents were a bit odd.” He leaned back and looked appraisingly at me. “At first she would just buy us ordinary little things, toys. But as we got older she started giving us rather . . . strange things.” He looked at me over his metal-rimmed glasses. I was startled. He had never seemed to want to share anything of himself before. In return, I had never told Hiroshi anything about myself, assuming he would find it contemptible. Apart from his work, he seemed to find most things faintly contemptible. He never asked me where I sloped off to at lunchtimes or what I did with my evenings, and I returned the compliment. Two guys keeping a wary professional distance. All I knew of his life beyond work was that he spent a lot of time smoking thin roll-ups in the dank, derelict little pit of a garden behind the old town-house that was our workplace. He would nearly always eat his lunch in the office, usually just a plastic box full of plain rice, with bits of something unidentifiable on top, and a single green apple which he would eat slowly, carefully and noisily.

The inquiring stare was becoming uncomfortably prolonged. Evidently he wanted me to say ‘What sort of strange things?’ but I didn’t want to play. I coughed, and reminded him we had a minor deadline to meet. For a second he looked even more embarrassed than I must have done, then he snapped his professional face back on, and we went back to work.

By lunchtime, I was desperate to get out of the office. I was afraid I might have offended Hiroshi. Normally, I would have got a sandwich and gone to the nearby park, but it was raining, so I sneaked off to a little place I knew just down the road. Nothing special, traffic roaring by outside the steamy windows, grubby lace curtains, fried food. I kept it for times when I wanted to hide from the world. Sipping watery coffee and breathing in the comforting smells of cooking oil and damp dishcloths, I pondered the problem.

Maybe, after months of working together like robots in that tiny office he had decided we ought to be friends or something. After egg and chips I decided it just was because he had started to try and give up the cigarettes, and needed some distraction. After apple pie and custard I wondered if he wanted something in return. As I finished my last thin, gritty coffee, I decided that on balance, I ought to play along. Whatever it was, I guessed he needed to get it off his chest. And anyway, now he had me going. Now I *wanted* to ask the damn question.

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Here in the suburbs near the edge of the city, the damage is not so great. It had not been one single, terrible firestorm, but many smaller blazes caused by embers flying on the hot wind. From certain angles, some of the houses looked almost untouched. The neighbourhood is still recognisable. Some of the trees have even survived, though many are terribly scorched. But it is not the same place changed, as after a snowfall. It is as if it were the corpse of the place she had known. Wherever its angry and tormented spirit roams, it is not here.

The local fire-watch have already taken what remained of the bodies to the temple where they will be laid in the courtyard with hundreds of others. She ought to follow them. There are rites she should attend. They never set much store by such things in life. And she cannot face more burning.

At the end of the street, a thin boy in a police uniform that is too big for him, clutches a bamboo stave. His face looks as if it has never smiled, and never could. He sees her, and fidgets, but does nothing as she enters the charred gate.

She wanders through the ruined garden. A stand of bamboo, drooping under the weight of fine grey ash that stirs and fumes like smoke as she brushes by. The garden is silent. No trickle of water falling into the little stone cistern.

She reaches out for the bamboo dipper, also grey with ash, laid across its cracked and blackened edge. Her hands close on nothing but a soft, crunching texture, a grey powder that sifts away between her fingers. She looks at her hands, bewildered, as if they were unaccountably covered in blood. It had not been the dipper at all, but only its charred ghost. She reaches down into the darkness of the once brimming cistern. Groping desperately, for something real, something that is not a phantom of fire. Somewhere near the bottom, she feels water, but so tepid, it might be blood. Something bumps against her hand. She snatches it back and peers nervously in. A small green frog, its nose just breaking the surface. Just a little please! She whispers, and cupping her hand, dips it carefully in.

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You can see the place I used to work, from the doorway of our little shop-front agency. On the left, a little way back towards town, a pretentious post-modern business block looming over the old houses on our side of the road, shutting out any view they once had of the river. It was a commercial training outfit that rented the whole top floor. The job was similar, technical translation and copywriting, but all for the same employer, so not as varied. In any case, it wasn’t a happy place, so I used to escape during my lunch breaks into the park behind the old houses.

The park occupies quite a steep hill. On fine days, I used to take my shoes and socks off, and stroll slowly up through the thick meadow-grass of the lower slopes until I reached a little horizontal path, some way below the summit. To the right the path curves left, clinging to the cornering slope of the green hill, itself a promontory of a larger hill the city had once climbed up and sat down on. The top of the promontory had at some time been beautified with trees, artfully wild shrubberies, rockeries, small cascades and ponds. In the middle of this arrangement was planted a tall, square tower of red-brown stone, its upper storey decorated with alarming balconies. On windy nights, four electric lanterns, hanging from iron brackets near the top, would swing restlessly about, giving it a wild and haunted air.

By contrast the lower slopes of the hill held memories of the open fields that could be seen across the river, beyond the city's low-lying edge. Rough grass, old lone trees, and even, running part way up the slope, the remnants of a hedgerow.

Arriving at the path, I would turn left, and follow it along the face of the hill to where it ended alongside a broad flight of stone steps leading to the upper promenade.

Well, not quite ended. If, instead of turning right up the steps, you turned a little left, and went through a gap in the shrubbery, you would find yourself in the unexpected space of a derelict bowling-green. A level square, cut into the side of the hill, shaded ahead and to the right with high stone retaining walls, tall trees and dark overhanging laurels and evergreens. The carefully tended grass was long gone, replaced by crumbling, weed-punctured asphalt. Faded pitch-markings suggested that even the more active ball games had failed to flourish in this spot. Few people ventured in, even on summer days. To the left of the entrance there was a concrete platform a few inches high. Embedded in it were the stumps of iron bolts that had probably once secured a wooden clubhouse to its foundation.

I would sit in this empty space and pass the time by imagining other uses for it. A swimming pool perhaps, shimmering in summer light, the stone walls echoing shouts and splashes, the concrete margins splattered with barefoot prints fading in the sun, until over-stamped with more. People in loungers dozing, parents endlessly supplying snacks, dry towels, clothes and sunscreen to over-excited children.

Or maybe an open-air cafe, with a colourful pavilion, tables with umbrellas set out across the square, sprinkled with elegant people and their lattes, frappés and cappucini. In winter perhaps, an ice rink, with a stall hiring skates and another little hut selling hot drinks and cinnamon pastries, as groups of friends swirled around the ice.

When I went home in the evenings it was often not the derelict bowling green I remembered but a lunchtime spent by the pool or in the outdoor cafe. I would catch myself wondering where I had put my wet swimming things, or feeling for the little biscotti wrapped in paper that for some reason I always slip into my pocket.

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She stands at last, alone in the empty ruins of her parent’s house. In a corner, some collapsed remains of her father’s library. She picks up a small, slim book. Thin coarse, white paper. Soft, dark blue paper covers, embossed with a faint pattern of chrysanthemums. It is smudged with ash. The white threads that bind it have broken and begun to unravel. Holding it carefully, she flips the pages, feeling the movement, seeing the thin ash-grey ink of the characters spin past her fingers.

But then she stops. Turns back a few pages, a few more, carefully separates two. A hot wine burns in her empty throat. She is the bright-faced child, who once stood here, not as now, under the open sky, but when this was a dark, old space, boxed in by polished wood. Watching Father’s steady hand hold the smooth, muscular, brown bamboo stem of the brush elegantly vertical, as its tip lightly, laughingly, tickles over the paper, creating the little man, his cane, and the recalcitrant, grumpy ox, throwing a resentful glance over its shoulder as it gallops heavily away. All for her delighted eyes, and hers alone. She can hear the soft click as he puts the brush down on its porcelain rest in the shape of five

tiny mountains. She can hear the whistle of his brown silk haori as he pulls his sleeves back down. She can hear his voice, deep and warm, like the brown handle of the brush, as he begins to tell her, very softly and precisely, the story of the Man and his Ox.

Tears that sting like smoke. Choking down a pain in her throat.

That time in the evening when he would stretch and yawn, and say ‘That’s enough! No more politics!’ She had learned, that if she got out of bed for a drink of water, or to complain that she could not sleep, or was frightened of the thunder, he would sometimes, just occasionally, let her sit next to him, and lean against his warmth as he sipped from a tiny square wooden measure of sake, and read poetry. Sometimes he would read fragments aloud for her, and sometimes she would ask questions, very softly, so as not to disturb the moths sitting near the lamp. And sometimes he would answer, and sometimes his answers became stories. And as he talked, it was as if his words stopped being grey, like his daytime, politics-and-business talk, and they became colourful, like old prints. And like the prints, his talk was full of incomprehensible but fascinating things, and among them, every now and then, something she could recognise, like a frog peeping out from under a leaf in the green, wet garden.

Had he read to her from this book? She could only remember the little drawing, the warmth of his body, and the glow of his bronze-brown haori silk in the lamplight. How did it begin, the story that went with this picture? Only the drawing, the room, the lamp, the silk - her Father’s presence. The words had come and gone, like music. Or smoke.

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