

CHAPTER ONE

Hanako's Birthday

One morning, I was looking through the *Yomiuri Shimbun* when a headline caught my eye: SCENE OF A DREAM OF HIROSHIMA RESTORED; DRAWINGS WERE 60 YEARS IN WASHINGTON, DC.

It couldn't be. But yes, there it was—my name—and there was my picture, too, just the way I'd drawn it so many years ago. I found myself immediately, an exuberant girl with a white headband, just about to cross the finish line. And then my eye fell on four figures among the crowd of spectators watching me.

In an instant, I'm home again. I am sulking, of course, because my mother is in the country again. But at least I am with my sister, Makiko. Her presence is so vivid that I smell the faint, familiar odor of her hair. It's August fifth, a hot and humid day, but I have my sister with me, and my heart swells with tenderness for her, for she has promised to take me out to the garden and talk to me about its mysteries.

Was that a butterfly that just flew into the window, the foolish thing? She would know its name. The sun's too bright? Better use a parasol.

Is that a leaf fluttering to the ground? Yes, a maple leaf.

I lean against the window, fanning my face with a round *uchiwa* fan. If only autumn would come soon and the war would end. The light from the sun bounces off the glass, making a rainbow. Makiko is outside, calling.

Hanako, come quickly! The lotus buds are quivering; a baby flower is about to blossom. Come now!

I rush out in my bare feet, but it is too late, just as she knew it would be.

Too bad, she says saucily. You missed it. It was like magic. I heard a flower open. Yes, there's a tiny sound, like this—*pon*—and then it opens. And look, a baby lotus flower.

It is beautiful, like a princess in our pond. I am angry for a moment; she should have called me earlier. But who could stay angry at Makiko?

The petals on this lotus flower will close when the sun goes down, she was saying, but tomorrow they will open again. If you wake up early, we can go see them, Hana-chan.

But I won't be home tomorrow, I say. I have to go to Aunt's house again, for my mother was insisting that I go. Will I be able to see the baby lotus flower when I come back?

Of course, my sister says, of course.

I was the only one going to our aunt's house in the country. It didn't seem fair that I wouldn't be able to play with my sister or my friends for another two weeks.

But you'll make new friends at the temple, Makiko said. And there are sure to be lotus flowers in blossom in the pond. It's just going to be for a little while. Mommy will be coming for you soon.

As I looked back, I realized that I could only have had a dim understanding of many things. I was only seven; how could it have been otherwise? I knew, of course, that we, the Japanese, were at war, but I didn't really know what war was or why men fought.

In our garden pond, the lotus-flower princess is shining in the sun. A dragonfly, iridescent red, wings up and settles gently on its brow.

What is it doing on that leaf, Sister Makiko? It looks too busy to be resting. I think it's dancing.

That's the way dragonflies lay their eggs.

This seemed another marvel to me: first the baby lotus flower and now the dancing dragonfly. How many eggs did she lay and how many would hatch? I babbled on. How many would become babies?

And can you really eat dragonflies? The old man next door said he eats grilled frogs *and* dragonflies, but is that true? Even if I get really, really hungry, I would never eat a frog or a dragonfly.

Frogs and dragonflies eat bad insects, she told me. They are God's messengers. We have to take care of them.

Then she bent low to my ear and whispered the word *dragonfly* so that only I could hear, for using English was forbidden at that time. As she did, I saw another, a blue one, light on our stone lantern. The grace of its flight made it, if anything, more beautiful than the iridescent red one. Without thinking, I reached up to touch it, but Makiko stopped me.

You must not do that, Hana-chan. That blue one might be the father of those eggs. There are babies in them.

Then she threw off her serious expression and said gleefully: Let's go swimming. We can find more dragonflies there and practice swimming too.

I'll race you, and off we flew in our bare feet all the way to the water's edge.

It was easy enough: the Motoyasu River was just behind our house. All we had to do was climb over the backyard fence and there it was, the cool, clear river. Although it was still morning, the sun was already hot, and there were many children in the water or on the embankments.

Makiko, my teacher in so many things, had decided it was time I learned to swim. She was wonderfully patient with me and stayed at her task despite the pleas of her friends to join them. Her smooth face, the disappearing dimples in her cheeks, and her deep, dark eyes filled the sky above me as I kicked and splashed. My sister. But there was something else about her today, something that made her start at times and look up sharply toward the sky, as though she were looking for something she could not share with me.

A boy about my sister's age came swimming up to us. His eyesight must have been pretty bad because even in the water he wore glasses. I thought that was funny.

Hey, Makiko, he said to her in that teasing way boys have.

How'd you like to take my turn this afternoon? I'll stay here and swim, and you can stand guard and see if any enemy planes fly over.

But my sister paid him no attention. She nudged me and pointed to the river bottom. Today's our lucky day, she said. For the bed was lined with tiny round *shijimi* clams, which we put in our morning miso soup whenever we could find them. I reached down and brought up a handful and showed them to Makiko. And she smiled at me.

Grandma appeared, looking stern and out of sorts. The time was slipping by and she hurried us back to the house. With my sister's help, I would pack a few things to take to my aunt's. I hated these so-called evacuations, but there was nothing to be done about it. I had to go and they had to stay.

Birthdays were not so important then as now. We normally only celebrated when someone turned three or five or seven, for those were important numbers. I was hoping, of course, that someone would remember it was my seventh birthday. But so far no one had.

To my surprise, when we got back to the house my grandmother's expression suddenly brightened. She had remembered, after all. Using millet and the last of the rice flour from the bin, she'd made sweet *kibi dango*, brown-rice dumplings, and with a warm smile, she put some in my hand and some others in my pack.

Grandma, what will we do now that you have used all the rice flour? my sister asked.

We'll be fine, she answered softly. We still have some dumplings, and we'll get some more rice when your mother comes back tonight. You don't need to worry, she said, putting her hand on my head with a warmth and affection that made me feel safe and comforted.

It was time to go. Makiko waved goodbye to me, and the dimples in her cheeks that only came out when she smiled reappeared.

Goodbye, Hana-chan. I'll take good care of those dragonfly eggs.

Be sure to tell me how many babies there are, I called back. I'll bring home lots of rice.

Then, I hurried off to the station with my grandmother to catch the coal bus to my aunt's house.

Good-Luck Omamori*

We had to change buses twice, so by the time we arrived at my aunt's farm it was late afternoon. All the way I counted the minutes until I could see my mother. She was a teacher and was assigned to go with her pupils to stay at a temple in the country, sometimes for weeks at a time. It hardly seemed fair that they got to spend so much time with her and I did not.

People talked about the war all the time, and particularly the bombings, but they were in Tokyo and other places far away. But never in Hiroshima, where I live. What I hated most about the war was this: that my mother was gone so often. My father I hardly knew.

Now I had finally seen her again and clung to her and felt the love and reassurance I so badly wanted. But she was preparing to go again, returning to the city that evening with her charges. I wanted more than anything to go with her. But no—evacuation it had to be.

I watched her strap my baby brother, Tadashi, on her back and fill a small wheelbarrow with sacks of good white rice. She went about it carefully, as she went about most things, pacing slowly around the thing, seeing the way the weight was balanced. I wanted her to hold me and take me with her. I was crying, begging, in front of the other children. But already, it was late.

Only when they were ready to leave did my mother look at me.

Here, my little Hana-chan, I have something for you. I am sorry that I could not do more, but this is a birthday charm, a silver *omamori* from the Senkyo Temple.

May it protect you against all harm. I have prayed for your health and good luck, my dearest and most precious child. Happy birthday to you. *Omedetou!*

She had not forgotten. Despite all the hardships of the war, she had remembered my birthday. Even so, when she went to leave,



Omamori. (Drawing by Yoshiko Jaeggi, courtesy of Shizumi Shigeto Manale)

I could not help but cry again and I pleaded with her to let me go with her.

After a moment, Grandma came and took me gently by the hand. Don't worry, she said. We will come back and bring you home soon.

But I want to go home! I cried. I want to go home.

My mother only turned and wiped away my tears. You have to stay, my little girl, she said, just a little while this time. I'll be back and then we can go home together. Yes, I promise. So please don't cry or you will make me cry too, and I don't want to do that in front of my students.

And she took my hand and opened my fingers and shook the tiny silver bells. They made a wonderful clear sound, rich in color and overtones. Then she put them in my hand again and gently closed it shut.

Now it was time for my aunt to speak. Hurry, Sister. These children must be going. She turned away, but I was listening and overheard her say something about enemy planes, Americans, coming from across the mountains, and in an instant my mother had lined up her pupils and they were gone.

My aunt and I watched, and we waved until their shadows disappeared down the curving mountain road.

A Gift from Kyushu

That evening my uncle came home unexpectedly from the Miike coalmines on Kyushu Island. He looked gaunt and grey but very pleased to see my aunt. She was pregnant, and he had been very worried about her.

I felt lonely staying in that large house but a little more secure with my uncle there. He had brought me a special present, too: a *zabon mikan*, a big round orange from Kyushu.

The *zabon mikan* had a beautiful smell. I was feeling ashamed of myself for having acted so childishly with my mother in front of the other children, so to make up for it, I decided not to touch the orange but wait until I could share it with Makiko, who had been so nice to me earlier that day.

Mushroom Cloud

I had often heard their urgent voices when there were air raids, my mother and the others. Quick, Hanako. Hurry, child. Turn off the lights. Move. Inside the shelter. Hurry—you must hurry, please. And they were saying America is the cause of all this, and the Emperor won't let it happen, and, finally, there's not much rice left. Air raids, airplanes, B-29 bombers, and the terrible destruction. *Tenno-heika, Banzai!* Long live the Emperor!

Every day we used to gather at the temple grounds to practice fighting in case our evil enemy ever dared attack. Under the guidance of a few old men, we learned how to thrust and parry with pointed bamboo poles. We would show the *beigun*,* the American enemies; we'd fight to the death to protect our Emperor.

Secretly, of course, I thought it was a lot of fun. I loved to run alongside the other children, yelling and screaming with imagined fury, my bamboo pole outstretched as I charged the dummy. It had an ugly demon's face and was filled with straw, and they'd hung it from a pine tree in the gardens. We pummeled it with blows and went home tired but satisfied.

It was just before eight the next morning when my uncle turned

on the radio. I was drinking my miso soup, half-asleep, when I heard a news bulletin. There was an urgency to the man's voice, and I remember my uncle jumping to his feet.

A B-29 has been seen over Fukuyama, he screamed. It's over Onomichi now and heading this way!

We have to take shelter immediately! Run, hurry, hurry, he shouted, but I just stood there in confusion while he raced out to get my aunt.

She's doing the wash in the back of the farmhouse and does not hear him shout. It takes her a minute to drop the clothes and dry her hands, and my uncle is pulling at her to get her moving. Together they race for the door, and then the house begins to shake.

An earthquake! my aunt yells, grabbing my uncle by the arm. It's an earthquake.

The quake is very strong now and making an awful rumbling sound. I stagger and fall, and the wooden case that holds their shoes tumbles on top of me. I hear a crash from the inner room; the altar has fallen over. Out of the corner of my eye, I see their little gold Buddha go flying through the air and out of sight. Our ancestors are fleeing; how could that be?

For a long time all is dust, with that terrible *churring* noise and the terrifying quaking. I scream for my mother and squeeze my good-luck *omamori* with all my might. Finally, my aunt pulls the case off me, cradling the baby in her belly with one hand, and together we all creep beneath the eating table.

Her face is cut in a few places and she keeps saying, an earthquake, an earthquake, a monstrous earthquake, over and over as she wipes the blood from her face with a cotton towel.

My uncle is bleeding, too, and his white shirt is torn. But no one is badly hurt, and at some point he goes out and brings us water and a blanket and squeezes back under the table with us.

How long we were there, wrapped together in that blanket, I cannot tell. It could have been five minutes, or it could have been an hour. At last, the shaking subsided; slowly we unfolded ourselves and came out.

The house was a shambles. I could scarcely comprehend what had happened. The Emperor's picture had fallen and the frame was cracked. There was furniture scattered everywhere and most of my aunt's plates were lying broken on the floor. Outside, several tiles had blown off the roof, but it was a solid house and the rest of it was still intact.

My uncle gathered us in his arms and then went to look for his radio. Somehow, he found it and managed to get it working. I watched as he held it to his ear. Suddenly he turned and cried in an anguished voice to my aunt, A huge bomb—they dropped a huge bomb on Hiroshima. The whole city is on fire.

Bitter curses rained from his tongue as he rushed us toward the village shelter. What have they done to us, these American bastards? he cried. Is there no end to their cruelty?

Please, please, we have to hurry. The B-29s could be here at any time.

As we were running, I saw a man, a neighbor of my aunt and uncle's, pointing toward the mountain beyond which lay the city of Hiroshima. Racing high above it, filling the sky with fury, was a huge cloud of horrid swirling air. The sight of this enormous black cloud, so sinister, so much more menacing than anything I could conceive, struck such fear in me that I, that I . . . have never spoken of it until this moment.

Would to God that I never saw a mushroom cloud. I pray that no one else will ever have to see one.

Inside the shelter it was as dark as night. Carved out of the rocks on the side of a hill behind the town hall, it was more like a cave than the shelter we had at home. There were about twenty of us, pressed together like a family of moles, scared and whispering, Was it an earthquake?

No, probably some bombs. In the city.

Bombs? In the city? How could that be? The city is so far away. It must have been an earthquake.

Such terrible luck, our neighbors muttered, such terrible luck. The war, the *gaijin*,* and their cowardly bombs—and now the city is on fire. What if they bomb us too?

But why would they want to? What have we done?

After a while, the men gathered up their courage and went outside. There were no planes in the air, at least for now, and so they brought us out into a world that would never be the same. We shook off the dirt and looked up at the thick red haze as if seeking a message from the gods. But the gods had flown away.

Sunset

A sunset the color of dried blood lay over the basin where the city of Hiroshima once stood. The old women of my aunt's village, the ones whose work was never done, stood by stunned, casting vague, uncomprehending glances toward the sky. What was this haze? No one spoke; no one knew.

Details of the destruction came in bits and pieces over my uncle's radio, and late that afternoon he and some other men from the village loaded their carts with rice and barley and left for the city. Cleaning up the village of Hon-chii would be the women's work.

The first of the wounded began streaming in that night. They came like ghostlike *yurai** in the eerie reddish twilight, their faces chalky and the skin hanging from their arms in strips, stalking the silent streets like skeletons in search of their own spirits.

A few of the stronger ones were pulling carts, some of which had dead bodies on them. Many survivors were burnt, terribly, painfully so, and their clothes were singed and stuck to their skin where the blood had dried and caked. Worst of all, to my young senses, was the smell: pungent, putrid, awful. It was a smell I would have to learn to live with.

White Silk *Juban**

By the next morning the village was crowded with these *yurai* ghosts, pale, charred figures, their lives and clothes in tatters. Their suffering transcended the small places where they lay and filled Hon-chii with their agony and cries for justice and relief.

My uncle was the village headman. He was the fifth generation of his family to hold the position, and his house was the largest in the village. So perhaps it was natural that he and my aunt opened it as a shelter. I watched in silence as she and the other women spread mats on the earth floor and, when there was no more space, out under the shade trees in the garden.

We need iodine, more Mercurochrome. Where are the bandages? Hurry—bring that hot water here. Help! Can't anybody help? I heard them crying, each voice more urgent than the other. But another voice was crying in me, much louder and more urgent than any of these strangers: my mother. Where was she? Where was she when I longed for her so much?

At length, my aunt came up to me and hugged me in her arms. Soon, too soon, she pulled back and resumed her firm expression.

Don't ask too many questions, Hana-chan. Not now. We just don't know the answers. In the meantime, we have work to do. Please, help me make these bandages.

But I pestered her with questions about my mother, our house, my sister, Makiko. Was everybody safe?

They are safe, she said. They must have gone to an evacuation center. They would be okay. They must be.

Together we tore up sheets. I went with her among the burnt and battered figures lying on the mats. Some of them were with their families, anxious huddles of people grieving their missing members.

One man in particular I remember: his face was covered with an old green cloth, and it had stuck where his eye should have been. My aunt had to change the cloth, and she stooped low to him and removed that horrid thing, blackened with the blood that had seeped through, and replaced it with her own white sheeting, and I grew woozy and the room spun around and I stumbled out of the room and fell into a kind of sleep.

When I came to, I was in the closet where she stored the futons and she was cradling me in her arms. I heard her crying softly. They had been looking for me everywhere, everywhere. After I could stand, she took my hand and we went back to making bandages.

By evening, there was no more space in the house or garden. Smell is a sharp sense, but it loses its sharpness quickly. Gradually, I forgot about the foul odor all around me and began to venture out among the strangers who lay suffering on the mats. Out in the back I found a girl under a mosquito net who looked familiar: my sister's friend Yuko.

Yuko-chan? Is that you?

Hana-chan. What are you doing here? Are you okay? Where is Makiko-chan?

We didn't know. No one knew. I asked her where my mother was. Was she safe; where could she be? She had no news and that frightened me terribly. But there was no time for that now. I looked at Yuko-chan. Her pants and blouse were smeared with grime, but, to my great relief, she had not been hurt.

Who is that? I asked in respectful words and voice about the person next to her.

It's my mother, she said.

I couldn't say anything for a while. She must have been suffering terribly. I brought them water; thank God we still had that.

Yuko-chan asked: Do you have anything for her—bandages, clothes, or cotton rags, anything—that I can bandage her with?

We did not have a sheet or shirt or piece of cloth that had not been cut up already. I knew that, but I went to my aunt and told her about Makiko's friend Yuko and her mother.

She had worked herself beyond the limits of endurance, my aunt, and was just sitting, cross-legged, on her bed mat, unable to sleep or stay awake.

Yuko-chan's mother is about to die, she said quietly, raising her eyes to mine. There is nothing we can do. With that she lay on the mat and curled herself up on one side as if to sleep. Instinctively, she reached out to draw me to her side. But then, after we had lain there briefly, she rose and drew a long, slow breath and went to the other room, stepping with great care over the smoldering ruins of people's lives, and back she came with a white silk *juban* wrapped in a fine rice paper.

We stepped our way back through the room and out into the

garden. It was easier now: I was learning not to see some things. I helped Yuko wash and powder her mother's face, filling the air with a fragrance of unexpected elegance. Then she and my aunt slipped the *juban* around her, taking great pains not to hurt her and adjusting it until it fit her well, and that was the way she died.

Senkyo Temple

Day after day they came, the burnt, the broken, and the bitter. My uncle came back from the city on his bicycle, pulling and walking a two-wheeled cart up to Hon-chii with five people on it. My mother, I thought, it must be my mother and the rest of them, Makiko, the baby, my grandmother, even my father would be there, hurt, perhaps, but not too badly. Surely, if anyone had found them, it would be my uncle. I rushed out to see.

But no. Uncle took a short rest, and then he and my aunt loaded rice sacks in his cart and he set off again for Hiroshima.

They'd opened the wide hall of the Senkyo Temple to the displaced, and we went there to see if my mother or any of my family might be there, or if anyone might know anything about them. The hall, where just days ago we had sat listening to the monks, was now filled with the torments of the burn victims and those who were trying to help them.

I noticed a boy about the same age as my sister, his eyes covered with cloth bandages red with recent blood.

Poor boy, my aunt said, the force of the explosion drove his glasses into his eyes. Can you give him water, Hanako?

I did and he clutched my hand. It was the boy from the Motoyasu, the one who wanted Makiko to take his sentry duty. What will happen to him? I asked. Will he lose his sight?

But my aunt said nothing, just did what she could for him, then took me by the hand and we went among the suffering strangers, looking, looking.

They tried to keep things from me, but I overheard my aunt, outside in the dark one night, talking to the neighbors about what my uncle had seen.

In the center, there's nothing left of the city, nothing standing: not a house, not a tree, not a single living thing. There are fires everywhere. They set it all on fire, she said bitterly. They destroyed our Hiroshima.

I don't know; I don't know, she whispered sadly as they crowded around her with questions of this relative or that. There may be survivors, she said. They think so, but nobody knows. It's impossible to find out anything, impossible to know. What I do know is this. My husband says that afterward, after their awful earthquake bomb, people ran out of their homes and down to the water, everybody who could walk or crawl, anything, just to get to the water. But nobody could help them. It was horrible, horrible, thousands and tens of thousands of corpses in the river. The smell had been unbearable. That was all she could tell them.

They began to weep and moan, and I know she wept with them, but after a while I heard her speak again.

It's up to us women, she said. We are the survivors; we'll have to work even harder now.

I had still heard nothing about my family. I missed my mother so intensely that she stayed in my thoughts day and night, and I often found myself dreaming of her and feeling her hold me closely in her arms.

News of the bombing kept trickling in, especially in the rare moments when my uncle was at home, but there was nothing about what mattered most. They tried to shield me from it, but somehow I'd heard enough to harbor many fears. At least my mother was safe, even if we can't find her, I told myself. Aunt had said so. Besides, I always had my good luck *omamori*, and I rang its silver chimes for my mother all day and night.

We spent the days in work and worry. Gradually, the victims left my aunt's house; either they died or found a hospital or clinic that could take them. On the radio we'd heard of another bombing, this time in Nagasaki, and a report saying that parts of Hiroshima were still burning. Only people involved in emergency relief, like my uncle, could get through. That was a harrowing time for my aunt and me. We both desperately wanted to get to

Hiroshima and find out what happened to my mother and my aunt's younger son, Hideki. He had been working in the city when the bomb struck and had not been seen since then, and she was frantic to find him.

As soon as the fires were out, she'd gone down to the city. This time for sure, I told myself, she'd find my mother, and I pictured how they'd be coming, walking together, tired after the long journey, perhaps, but she'd be alive and well and here with me.

Aunt came home alone. I couldn't find anyone, she said wearily, not my son, or your mother, or your sister, or anybody. There's so much . . . destruction, it's awful, awful. It's impossible to get around. No one has any information. They could be anywhere.

They're probably at an emergency center, one of her neighbors volunteered, or at a hospital getting treatment.

Yes, they probably are, my aunt agreed. They probably are. I'm going back tomorrow to keep looking.

Let's go back now, I insisted. I want to go home. I want to see my mother. I want to see my sister and my dragonfly babies. My aunt looked up and a tender flicker of a smile crossed her face.

I wish I could take you to see the baby dragonflies, my little one, she said. But that's no place for a young child. Not yet. It's just not safe.

Otoh-chan (Father) and Okaa-chan (Mother)

Two. Two? What are you? I am one and I am two. Two eyes? Two ears, too. Are there any more twos for you? Yes, my mother's warm, sweet hands make two.

I am in the courtyard of an emergency center they'd set up in a temple a few kilometers from Hon-chii. There are soldiers everywhere and lines and lines of nervous, angry people. But I'm watching a little girl sing the numbers song. I know that song, every child does, so we sing it together. Two, two, what are you? One and two, two eyes, two ears too.

Turning around, I see my shadow lengthening in the afternoon

sun. It's fun to pretend I'm a sumo wrestler and step like a giant over the little girl's shadow, then watch her try to do the same to mine. I move and she steps on my shadow and I cry out as if in great pain. She laughs and I find myself laughing too, but then I catch myself and stop.

After a while my aunt comes out of the temple, looking anxiously for me. She grabs my hand and off we set across the battered bridge, walking swiftly. It's only then that I realize that she thought she'd lost me in the crowd.

Hana-chan, I think they've found your father, she says in a low voice. They say he's in the emergency clinic. Tomorrow we'll go and see him.

We could not go that night. No one dared to stay outside after darkness fell. The *yurai* ghosts came walking then. I'd seen them once and lay in terror of them every night.

I was glad, of course, that they had found my father. But why couldn't it have been my mother or my grandmother? And where was Sister Makiko? But my aunt didn't know. I only know that your father is alive, she said. Tomorrow we will go and find him.

The next morning we got up early and hopped aboard the little cart so my uncle could pull us behind his bicycle. On the way she talked to me of my father, of the things he had done in the army, where he had gone, the campaign medals he had won, the man he had been before the war.

The road had many twists and turns as it dropped down toward Hiroshima and at one we caught a clear view of what lay below. Even now, I can see it, the grey-black, smoldering cinders of the ruined city, the devastated streets and buildings stretching out for miles, the charcoal-colored stumps and trees. No child should have to see these things.

We drove on in heavy silence, out of the green country, trailing behind my uncle's bike. We could smell the city before we got to it. My aunt had brought cotton, which we placed up our noses, and we covered our faces with *tenugui* cotton towels, and still it didn't help that much.



Hiroshima, as seen from Honkawa School, 1945. (Courtesy of Honkawa Elementary School, Hiroshima)

At first there are only a few indications, as if warnings, of what lies ahead of us: some shattered windows, a broken roof, smoke rising in the distance. We drive on; the road is rough now and my uncle has to stop at times, and then it gets so bad we have to get out and walk, over the rubble . . . the heaps of rubble, the homes and shops and offices that used to be so full of life. . . .

At one point a policeman stops us and asks us where we're going. He's not much older than Makiko and missing the lower part of his arm. My uncle salutes when he sees that and tells him the name of the emergency center we're looking for. We walk on. Most of the bridges are broken, half-toppled into the river, but finally we find one that we can get across.

They'd set up the center in a post office. It had been a solid building and most of it was still intact. Inside, they'd laid down rows of wooden boards for beds. Pain was everywhere you looked,

on the planks and under the bloody sheets, and in faces of the people who stood by helplessly, looking, looking. I knew it now, that looking, and that brought back the fear. I shut my eyes and tried to shut it out.

We finally found my father, lying on a board with two other men in a crowded room somewhere on the second floor. At first I did not recognize him. I almost wish I never had.

Hana-chan, my aunt said. It's Otoh-chan, your father. Go to him. She motioned to me, but I held back. I was scared to approach him, for fear, I am ashamed to say, that I'd be compelled to hug him.

He seemed to understand that and smiled at me. I went and stood by his bed and bowed. His face was swollen and there were tears in his eyes. Hana-chan, my baby girl, he said with great effort. You're alive. You're alive and you're safe. So good. So good.

There was little left of him beneath the blanket, I could see that much. It took a long time to understand. I had not been hurt and so many others had. Now, as I see my father's face again, it is in this dark-blue room, across a sea of troubled, purple faces.

But I try not to think of them, only of my duty. I draw my lips tight and smile. I hold his good hand; the other one is burnt all the way through to the bone and dreadful to look at.

These are not the hands of my father, I think. They belong to some other man. I cannot look directly at him—my own father.

Otoh-chan, it must be so very painful, I finally say. I am so sorry, so sorry, and I turn to my aunt and bury my head in her bosom and cry.

But what is this? He knows where my mother and baby brother are? Or so I hear him tell my aunt. He is weeping now and labors to speak, like an old man, weary of the world.

Okaa-chan and Tadashi are in . . . the other room, he says through the pain.

My heart bursts with happiness. My mother is alive. My wish has come true. I want so much to believe it that I ask him to say it again, where she is and who is with her, but my aunt just puts her finger on my lips.

No more questions, child. Your father needs to rest. You stay here quietly with him. I'll be back as soon as I can.

I harbor such a longing for my mother that, even with my father now, I cannot hide my feelings, and I chatter on about all the things that we will do when I see her again. He smiles briefly, and I pull out my silver *omamori* and ring its silver bells for him. After so many days and nights, I am going to see my Okaa-chan.

It seems as though my aunt is gone for hours. Where is my mother? I have to see her. Where is her bed mat? Without knowing it, I start walking around the room, disturbing people, asking if they know where my mother is. Okaa-chan, Okaa-chan, where are you? All the time I am praying that she's not burnt, maybe just a little if it has to be, but not like my father.

I cannot find her in the crowded room. I return to my father; his eyes are closed; only his lips are twitching slightly. He awakes when I take his hand, and he asks for water. I help him drink, the way my aunt has taught me: one hand on top, one hand on the bottom.

Thank you, my little Hana-chan, he says, so softly that I have to bend low to hear, and the odor—sweat and dirt and rotting flesh—is almost overwhelming. At last my aunt appears. I run to her. Surely, my mother is right behind her. But her eyes show only sorrow. And then I see: a little wooden box, wrapped in white cotton cloth.

Where is Okaa-chan? I demand. Take me to her now.

But my aunt just shakes her head. Can't you understand? she finally asks. Your mother and Tadashi-chan are here, in this box.

But how could she be in such a tiny box? I cry in desperate confusion.

Poor Hana-chan, she says sadly. Okaa-chan and Tadashi-chan have passed away. They are watching you from heaven now. We must pray for them. Their spirits are counting on you. You must be good and show them what a good daughter you can be.

I hardly hear half of what she's saying. I cannot understand. Okaa-chan cannot be in that tiny box, I scream. She can't be in there. She promised to come to see me.

My poor aunt said nothing. She went to hug me but I pushed her away. Everyone near us had been listening to our conversation and many of the women were weeping with us, and for themselves as well.

Nobody can come back from death, my aunt told me as we made our way through the edges of the devastated city. We can't change that. And we can't change this, this horror that's all around us.

All the way to Hon-chii she let me cry. We'd never found her little gold Buddha and when we got to my aunt's home, she put my mother and baby brother on the altar, where the Buddha used to be. Many times I came to look at them, resting in their tiny box. It must be very painful, I thought, to be squeezed into such a space. Yet they were together, and I was alone.

The next night my uncle came home with another little wooden box, this one with my father in it. He said nothing but placed it quietly on the altar, next to my mother and Tadashi. Later that night I saw him reach in his pocket and put something on the table. I only saw it for a second, but I knew what it was instantly: my mother's glasses.

One lens was missing and the other was cracked, and the frames, which had partly melted, were stretched in odd, extruded shapes.

My aunt glared at him, then reached out and took them and put them in her pocket. What are you doing? she hissed. Then she bowed her head for a long minute and went and put them on the altar, too.

How easy it was to see my mother in my imagination then. Her smiling face was my constant companion. I'd taken to wearing the good-luck bells around my neck, tied to a ribbon that she'd given me and to which, it seemed to my disordered mind, a trace of her scent still clung. Sometimes I would talk to my sister too, about a flower that was blooming or a grasshopper that I'd caught, and how an evil bomb had fallen from the sky and sent Okaa-chan and Tadashi to heaven. And now my father had gone to join them.

Uncle passed his hand through his hair and pulled a few

strands free. He shook them off and turned away. Try as he might, he'd been unable to find information about their son or my grandmother, but he had heard from someone who thought they'd seen my sister walking on the Aioi Bridge.

As soon as my aunt heard this, she began to pack her things. Where are you going? my uncle asked.

No more coming and going, she said. Hanako and I are going to Hiroshima. I am going to look for my son. And Makiko.

How can you find someone who isn't there? he hurled back at her.

You can't find them, but maybe I can, she shot back. Let me try at least.

But where will you stay?

There's a shelter just outside of town. I heard it on the radio.

Well, you should leave Hana-chan here, he said. That's no place for her; leave her with the neighbors.

What, and let her wander the streets? My aunt would not hear of it. For the village was not the same as before. There were strangers everywhere, odd, sick, and injured people, sad, deformed, and damaged people, burnt, bewildered, and pain-wracked.

Among them were many children, alone and hungry, desperately looking for their parents and their families. But no one could help them, or would, or so it seemed, for everyone had his own catastrophe, and after a while people stopped seeing them, as if they had become invisible, or worse, an irritant, like mosquitoes.

That night I prayed that we would find my sister. I imagined how it would be when I saw her again. I practiced many clever things to say. I had heard my uncle's warning, though, and wondered how we'd find her. For how can you find someone who is not there—unless you have a lucky *omamori*?

The Emperor's Voice

She woke me in the early hours. We ate our rice without a word and left before the sun came up. There was a coal bus running

from the village again that took you to the outskirts of the city. After that you had to walk. There were many people like us on the road, carrying packs and pulling carts.

What was my sister wearing when they saw her? I asked my aunt. Did she have her blue kerchief on? And why didn't this bus take us all the way to the river like the old one used to?

I pestered her and pestered her until finally she turned on me and said: You are old enough to understand what has happened, Hana-chan. What you see is real. I wish I could change it for you, pretend that all this is just a terrible dream. But it isn't. All this, everything you see, everything you know and learned is gone. Everything has changed.

The August sun beat down on us as we walked along the broken road toward the river and the center of the town. Beads of sweat collected on our foreheads and under our straw hats. My aunt was walking quickly now, covering her face with a *tenugui* towel tucked at one end under her hat. She was heavy with the child and breathing hard.

We sat for a bit on the side of the road. Then she rose and we started down a path that twisted between the piles of rubble. Everywhere was the same charred mess. We saw a man lying on the roadside. My aunt approached, to see if he was alive or not, then bowed briefly, put her hands together, prayed, and started walking once again. He's already passed away, she said with a sigh. I'm sorry for him.

I am sorry for him too, I replied. But I was getting used to saying that and meaning it less and less. It took a long time to understand. Of course, I'd seen a lot of people suffering from their wounds and dying of them, and I'd lost my fear of that—no, not my fear, so much as the ability to be shocked by it. The pain I stored in a spot so far away it would take me sixty years to find it.

As we went on, we saw two figures lying in the shadow of a solitary wall. One was small, like a child, with a heavily bandaged leg, and the other a woman of uncertain age. My aunt hesitated to approach, guessing they too might be dead. But she composed herself and went up to them. The child had passed to heaven—I

could have told her that—but the woman was still alive and my aunt lifted her head gently and cradled it in her arms, calling to me to bring the water pitcher. I felt glad that the woman was still alive and rushed to help her. My aunt tried to give her water, but either she was too weak to take it or too far gone.

I don' wanna die, she kept repeating deliriously. I don' wanna die.

We ran back to the main road to look for help. We had done what we could. Couldn't somebody help her, take her to an emergency center? We asked and asked, but nobody paid us any notion. Nobody had the time. That too had been destroyed.

But we were no different from the others, and regretfully we turned and started walking again under the glaring sun, and watching the sky. There were enemy planes in the sky every day now and we were all terrified that they might drop another bomb at any moment.

On the way, a man pulling a two-wheeled cart behind his bicycle stopped and asked if we'd like a ride. It must be hard for you, he said to my aunt, bowing vaguely toward her belly. Hop on board.

With that, he got off and helped her up onto a wooden crate. He sat me on a stack of sandbags. For some reason I remember this experience with great clarity—perhaps because it was fun to sit in the back of a cart, swaying on a stack of sandbags and looking down on everyone we passed. Without thinking about it, I started singing the counting song again, numbering the trees and talking to my sister. But my aunt and the man who was pulling us remained silent all the way.

They were beginning to haul away the debris from a few main streets, but most roads were impassable, save for the narrow paths that cut across the piles of pulverized concrete. Not far from the central plaza, near the Military Police Headquarters, our new friend stopped pedaling, and we scurried out of the cart. People were coming into the plaza in great numbers, bitter, ragged, determined people, and there were soldiers everywhere, standing at attention and raising their arms in brisk salute.

Somebody was saying something over the loudspeakers. My aunt and the man jumped to attention, straight as soldiers, and I followed suit, not knowing why.

Tenno-heika, Banzai! Long live the Emperor! a voice cried out. I turned and saw a man holding his military cap high above his head, as if in triumph.

But as the sound of the Emperor's voice came over the loudspeakers, everyone bowed. Many were weeping. I couldn't understand. I looked around; there were men and women of all ages, standing or kneeling on the ground, sobbing bitterly. Others covered their faces. One old man collapsed on the ground as if stricken with a heart attack, his body shaking.

Why are they crying? I asked my aunt. What has happened now? But she just shook her head and turned away. The man refused to answer too, just stared emptily into space, his head to one side. Then he too went down on his knees, his head sunk on the sooty ground.

Then one by one the soldiers who had been standing so smartly at attention dropped to the ground, sitting with their legs beneath them, *seiza*-style.*

These brave men wept. The shame of it, they said. Japan had lost the war. How could it be? We were winning. That's what they told us. We were winning, and now, surrender, defeat. After all these years of sacrifice, what would become of us?

This moment of surrender was the first time we'd ever heard the Emperor's voice. Until then, he'd been a god. But now the gods had flown away. I knew. I'd seen them fly.