

*Beyond the  
Blossoming Fields*

BEYOND THE  
BLOSSOMING FIELDS

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# 1

The Toné is the largest river flowing through the Kanto Plain. By the time it reaches Tawarase in northern Saitama, it is a mighty and placid waterway swollen with snow melted from the rocky slopes of the mountains ringing the plain.

In the late nineteenth century, white-sailed boats glided gracefully along its surface. Standing on its banks looking out over its expanse, you could count up to fourteen sails at a time. With the chants of the head oarsmen too distant to hear, the scene seemed to stand still in the soft spring sunshine.

The river was edged by a thick swath of marsh grass, beyond which was a high bank of mounded earth. Fields of green wheat stretched from there to the tree-lined streets of Tawarase.

At the centre of the wheat fields lay the estate of Ayasaburo Ogino, the village headman. The imposing walled residence had a gatehouse in front and white storehouses behind it, enclosing a garden shaded thickly by zelkova and palm trees. From the river bank, it resembled a castle in the centre of the plain.

The area was populated with families bearing the name Ogino. All were descended, however circuitously, from the Ashikaga clan, and the family crest bore the same circle with two horizontal lines as the Ashikagas. Among the many Ogino families, the home of Ayasaburo was referred to as Upper Ogino. They, along with Lower Ogino, were the most venerable of the clan and, until modern times, they were one of the very few farming families to enjoy the privilege of a surname and the right to carry swords.

That year, Ayasaburo was fifty-two years old. He had been suffering from inflamed joints for three years, and spent most of his time in bed in an inner room of his house. His eldest son Yasuhei was twenty-four, still single, and showed little interest in farming. It was therefore left to Kayo, Ayasaburo's forty-five-year-old wife, to attend to all household matters.

Kayo was a small woman with beautiful eyes. She was a good wife and, not unduly influenced by her family's exalted status, she ran the home with a steady hand. At the end of the day when all the work was done, she made sure her husband had the first bath, followed by her two sons, and then all of the family servants down to the lowliest servant girl. It was only then that she would take a bath herself. Kayo considered it only natural that she should oversee every detail in this way. She had just two sons, Yasuhei and Masuhei, and her other five children were girls. All five daughters were clever like their mother, able to read and write, and known for both their intelligence and their beauty. They were all married.

"Learn from Upper Ogino" was a saying heard often in these parts. All the villagers loved and respected them. Recently, however, a rumour had started circulating about the family.

Three years earlier their fifth daughter, Gin, had married Kanichiro, the eldest son of the wealthy Inamura farming family in nearby Kawakami village. Now people were saying that Gin was back in Tawarase. But she was not there to give birth or to pay her respects to her parents. She had returned alone, bearing nothing but a single bundle in her arms. Two weeks had already passed since then.

Neither the Ogino family nor any of the servants had a word to offer on the matter, but no fewer than three villagers had seen her walking along the Toné River headed for her parents' home.

This was a country village that knew little excitement as long as the Toné did not flood its banks. Things were different in Tokyo, where the Meiji government had recently been established and the emperor newly installed from Kyoto, but the ripples of change had not yet reached northern Saitama.

The villagers here were bored and yearned for gossip. Little did they care if it was a new bride or a funeral – anything would do. The matter of a daughter of the area's most eminent family returning for an unannounced visit to her parents was sufficient to keep tongues wagging.

"Could it be a problem with her husband's family?"

"They say she shows no sign of going back."

"All the Ogino girls are beautiful, but she is certainly the most attractive – and I hear she's smart too."

"She completed the Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism by the age of ten."

"What could possibly be keeping her here?"

"Of course I don't have it first hand, but there is talk that she is suffering from melancholia and has come back for rest."

"But there was no one to accompany her from Kawakami."

"Yes, exactly! That's what is so unusual."

"Was she not getting along with her mother-in-law? or her husband?"

"Well, it's undoubtably a household with exacting standards – the Inamuras of Kawakami were assistant magistrates for generations, and I've heard that her mother-in-law Sei is still strong and runs the home with a very firm hand."

"It couldn't be a divorce, now, could it?"

"In Upper Ogino? Certainly not. Her mother would never allow such a thing."

"They do have a reputation to keep up."

In a traditional, conservative village during the early years of Meiji it was unheard of for a young wife to run away from her husband and return to her parents' home. The rumours spread quickly and it was a matter of enormous speculation. Neither Yasuhei nor Kayo, however, gave the slightest indication that anything was amiss. They favoured people they met in the street, and the pedlars and tenant farmers who came to the house, with their usual good-natured smiles. Visitors were given no cause to suspect that anything was wrong.

"Maybe she's gone back to Kawakami. Nobody has seen her at home."

"No. Everyone knows that Gin is not in her husband's home."

"Perhaps she's gone to recuperate at a hot spring?"

"She's with the Oginos. If she had left, someone would certainly have seen her. She must be in one of the inner rooms."

Inhabitants of tiny farming villages were perceptive. No matter how well Kayo kept up appearances, the rumours refused to die.

Indeed, they grew with each passing day. Kayo must have known what people were saying. She could feel the eyes of the villagers following her with a mixture of pity and curiosity. There were even some who tried to coax information out of her gently in passing conversation. It had been thirty years since Kayo married into the Ogino family, and this was the first time anything like this had happened. But Kayo maintained her silence on the matter. She refused to risk any damage to the family name – after all, they had a duty to set an example to others.

## 2

“So, where is Gin?”

Tomoko dispensed with all but the basic niceties and got to the point as soon as she arrived. Tomoko was the fourth Ogino daughter, just four years older than Gin, and it had been five years since she had married the eldest son of a Shinto priest in Kumagaya. She had received a letter from her mother about an urgent matter, and had departed Kumagaya for Tawarase the next morning. The matter, of course, was Gin.

“She’s in the inner room next to the hallway.”

“Is she bedridden?”

“She gets up from time to time, but she still has a fever.”

“Has a doctor been to see her?”

“Dr Mannen came.”

Tomoko nodded. Mannen Matsumoto was a scholar of Chinese studies, who had come to Tawarase ten years previously, accompanied by his daughter Ogie, to open a private school for the villagers. As a child, Tomoko herself had been allowed to sit in on her brothers’ lessons with him. As with many Chinese scholars of his time, Dr Mannen was also learned in Chinese herbal medicine, and served as the village doctor as well as a teacher.

“And what does he say?”

“Well...” Kayo glanced around to make sure they were alone, then drew closer to Tomoko and spoke in a low voice. “He says it is *norin*.”

“*Norin*?”

Kayo nodded almost imperceptibly.

*Norin* was the term used in Chinese medicine to mean gonorrhoea. The patient suffered a high fever, severe pain in the infected area and pain when urinating. In modern times, gonorrhoea can be cured with penicillin and other antibiotics, but in those days even sulphur drugs were not yet available, and it was considered an incurable disease.

"How long has she had it?"

"From what Gin says, it has been two years."

"That means that her husband..."

Kayo remained silent.

"So she's had it since soon after she married." Tomoko was taken aback. "Did Dr Mannen say how long it would take to cure?"

"It's hard to tell, but from what he has told me, it may not be possible."

"I heard that a woman with *norin* may never have children."

"That's what Dr Mannen says." Kayo's voice was low and she sounded discouraged.

Tomoko sighed heavily. "What do the Inamuras have to say?"

"We haven't heard a word. Gin spoke to no one when she left except to tell a maid that she was going to Tawarase to get some rest."

"And what does she plan to do?"

"I don't think she has any intention of returning to Kawakami."

"She can't be serious." Tomoko sat up straight in surprise. "And you're saying that she came to Tawarase all by herself?" Tomoko could not imagine leaving her husband's home without telling anyone, and Gin had married into one of the wealthiest families in northern Saitama. "I can't believe she's done this to us!" A sister who had run away from her husband would cause repercussions for the entire family, including herself. "How can you let her stay here? You know you ought to send her back." Tomoko was quick to blame her mother for spoiling her youngest daughter and raising her to do as she pleased.

"I know that, but you should have seen her when she arrived. She was burning with fever and doubled over with stomach pain. It's only in these last two or three days that she has begun to feel better."

"That means she was ill before she got here."

"She says she's been bedridden since winter. She did write that she had a cold, but said nothing to worry me at all. At any rate, we gave her to the Inamuras as a bride, and it wouldn't have done to enquire about her."

Tomoko understood what her mother was trying to say, and listened carefully as she continued.

"Gin was humiliated, and hoped to recover before anyone noticed she was ill. She broke out in a fever in February, but continued to do the housework and other chores as usual. Then she got too dizzy to get up in the morning, and she's been that way ever since."

Tomoko was beginning to see why her sister had decided to run away. When Kayo had first been approached about the marriage for her youngest daughter, she had immediately agreed to it. Not once had Gin been consulted. Gin had done as she was told, and the entire process had taken place according to the social norms.

Kayo knew that Gin was not to blame; it was she and the go-betweens who had set up the marriage. "It's all my fault." She covered her eyes with her hand.

"It's just a stroke of bad luck," Tomoko began, intending to comfort her mother, but was unable to say more, as what it meant for Gin began to sink in.

Kayo quickly reached for the iron kettle and poured hot water into the teapot.

"What does Father say about all this?"

"He told me to send her back immediately."

"To Kawakami?" Now Tomoko did not know what to think. She was upset with her sister for running back to her parents, and now she was speechless at her father's command that she be sent back to the man who had given her the disease.

"Mother, what do *you* think Gin should do?"

"If she stays here, there will be all kinds of social complications. It would be best for everyone if she left as soon as possible..." Kayo hesitated. "But she probably has her own thoughts on the matter."

"Especially if the disease is incurable," concluded Tomoko.

"I asked you to come because I want you to talk to her and find out how she feels about it all."

Gin was the youngest child, and since Tomoko was the nearest to her in age, they had always been close. Tomoko had come home the day before Gin's wedding, and the two had spent the

entire night talking. Gin had had no qualms about her marriage. Only sixteen years old, she'd been full of girlish expectations. It was hard for Tomoko to believe that just three years later, her cheerful, clever sister could have come back home in such a state.

"We will have to contact the Inamuras before too long."

"Who would have guessed he was a man like that?" Tomoko tried to recall the glimpses she had had of Gin's fiancé before they were married. He had lovely fair skin that was almost too good for a man and contrasted attractively with Gin's healthy wheat-coloured complexion. "I guess I'll never understand men."

It was the only thing she could think of to say.

Tomoko looked into the room down the hall from her father's, where Gin was lying down, reading a book.

"Tomoko!" Gin put down the book and sat up.

"No, don't get up," Tomoko protested, but Gin rearranged her sleeping kimono and sat up properly anyway.

"How are you feeling?"

When she left to be married, Gin had had a soft egg-shaped face. Now it looked like an upside-down triangle, her bones standing out sharply. Her complexion was the pale-bluish colour characteristic of gonorrhoea patients.

Instead of answering, Gin asked Tomoko, "What are you doing here?"

"I had business in the area, and I thought I'd stop in and see how Mother was doing. What a surprise to learn you were here too!" Tomoko tried to act nonchalant, but there was no fooling Gin.

"Mother asked you to come, didn't she?"

Tomoko was silent.

"She wanted to talk to you about me."

Tomoko finally nodded. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Do you have something to say to me?" Gin was ready. Her eyes, red-rimmed with fever, were sharp. Tomoko knew she had no choice but to be truthful.

"I've heard all about it from Mother. It's all so sudden, I don't know what to think."

"You're angry with me, aren't you?"

"No." The illness had made Gin look like an invalid, small and older than her years, and Tomoko was more shocked than angry. "But you must know that you can't just stay here. If you need time to convalesce, go to a hot spring like a proper convalescent. Or go back home and rest – you can't just hide here in a back room and expect no one to notice."

"And that is your opinion?"

"Well... you know I'm only thinking of your best interests."

"So you're telling me to go straight back to Kawakami?"

"No, no, that's not what I'm saying. Mother asked me to find out what you have in mind."

"May I be honest, then?"

"Of course, I'm your sister. You know you can."

"Then I will." Gin looked her sister in the eye and continued, "I won't be going back to the Inamuras."

"You mean?..."

Gin nodded determinedly. "That was my decision when I left."

Tomoko was once again speechless. Rather than looking ashamed, Gin was obviously relieved at having spoken, and she began to look almost serene. Now Tomoko felt like the younger sister.

"I'm trying to decide when to tell Mother and Father."

"Gin." Tomoko knew she had to say something, but she had no idea what. "So, are you planning to divorce your husband? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes." Gin shook slightly when she heard the words put so plainly.

"And you know that if you do this you will probably never be able to marry again? You may be single for the rest of your life."

"I don't mind that." Now the relief in Gin's features was even more evident as she gazed out into the garden, where the sun was beginning to shine through the canopy of leaves. It was not an expression you would expect on the face of a young woman contemplating anything as life-shattering as divorce. Tomoko's shock began to be mixed with irritation.