

OKEI

A GIRL FROM THE PROVINCES

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They say not a drop of rain falls during the dry season in California, so
it must have been the wet season then. I was nodding off in the car as
the rain began to hammer down.

We were on the freeway; it was not yet fully daybreak, and we'd
been driving for hours at ninety miles an hour, seeing very little
traffic. Interstate Highway 80 runs between monotonous bare hills
and scattered ranches; it had been a steady ride the whole time, as if
the car were being carried along on railroad tracks. The Pinto we had
rented with a deposit of twenty-five dollars had fairly flown through
the darkness.

N***, a young man who said he had received his driver's licence two
years ago, took his hands off the wheel whenever he lit up a cigarette
or consulted the map. Each time, the car kept going straight for two or
three hundred meters without veering an inch either way. I could see
why, on this vast continent, people often speed.

The first time I saw the hills glowing in the light, I was reminded of
the mountains in Manchuria I had seen long ago, which were literally
bare. These mountains were actually covered with grass about ten
inches high – I supposed it was pasturage – but because they were a
faded brown, the hills looked barren.

“It's fall,” I said, “so the grass must be starting to dry; it's a little early,
though.”

N*** laughed. He said he had thought the same thing at first, but
that's the way it looks all year round.

It was hard to believe the grass was not dead. Grass that doesn't turn
green, even in springtime: this was a desiccated landscape, unimaginable
in our own well-watered countryside.

For us who grew up in that rich green natural environment, this
dryness cannot but leave us with despair at its primeval harshness. It

goes hand in hand with the incredulity one feels upon learning that all the plants in San Francisco's 125 lush acres of botanical garden were imported into a desert site. The earth is brought to life by the extravagant – and effective – expenditure of three million gallons of water a day, sprinklers ceaselessly working to sustain the greenery and shade that is in places reminiscent of a tropical jungle.

Something unthinkable up until a hundred years ago, I thought, as I stared out the window at the hills rolling past.

The freeway ran due east, cutting through the hills, splitting the valleys, shaving away the slopes. Covered wagons must have travelled this route, rattling over a rocky road, day and night. To anyone accustomed to this western wasteland it might have been no hardship, but how hopeless and desolate it must have felt to a stranger to this country. The histories of western settlement tell of daily struggles with yellow dust, fever, Indian raids, and outlaw attacks.

In 1848 the Gold Rush began after gold nuggets and gold dust were discovered in Coloma, near Sacramento, and treasure-seekers descended on the area from all points of the compass. The gold eventually ran out and people left, leaving their ruins behind, but some cultural traces always remain where there has been human habitation. The population of Sacramento at the height of the frenzy grew from 700 souls to 50,000 in the space of a year, and the route from San Francisco to Coloma was developed, both by water and by land.

Sacramento is now the capital of the state of California, a city of government offices with an orderly, even rather cold atmosphere. About the only place reminiscent of the days when drunks brandished whiskey bottles and six-barrel guns was Old Town, in the northern part of the city. It was being restored as a historical district, but it seemed rather new and did not match our movie image of a western town.

If coming from San Francisco, the way to Coloma is always through Sacramento. By land, you take Interstate 80. By water you start at Grizzly Bay, which cuts into the Central Valley, then up the Sacramento River and its tributary, the American River. In Gold Rush days it must have been on paddle-wheel riverboats, like the ones you imagine on the Mississippi. About twenty miles up the American River, you arrive at Folsom Lake. Across this lake and up another river is the village of Coloma, but this water route probably did not exist a hundred years ago. The records describe this route only as far as Sacramento; the swift

current and the overhanging trees on both banks may have been too much of a hindrance to navigation.

But I digress. On our way to Coloma, we turned off Interstate 80 at Auburn. Auburn is a quiet town that still has its hundred-year-old fire watchtower. For a country with as brief a history as the United States, even a structure no more than a century old becomes precious as a monument. Signs of a healthy enthusiasm for historical preservation were visible all over the region. There being few stone buildings of the kind one sees in Europe, even the jail in the village of Coloma has become a historical landmark, with its cube-shaped cage of iron bars looking like something out of the Middle Ages.

2

Auburn, like many towns in the area, had prospered during the Gold Rush. At the intersection of several roads, including Highway 49, it must have grown from a stagecoach stop into a major destination. In the middle of town, an old streetscape is preserved with individual storefronts rising along the steep slope. The second-storey balconies, the narrow entrances with thick columns, the false fronts with their store signs – all have a distinctive Old West look. There is a bank with a bronze plaque noting its construction in 1887. This brought back the fond memory of an old-fashioned, white-plaster building for the Bizen Bank that I could see from my train window on a trip back home to Japan. That was over twenty years ago; I don't know what has happened to it since. Of course, even that bank building in Auburn now houses a laundry.

Uphill a short distance to the south is the new part of town. Once past there, we are immediately in the mountains, with deep ravines and high peaks covered in stately evergreens. It's an abrupt transition, like being transported directly from the lowlands to the top of Mount Kōya on the Kii Peninsula.

We were already in El Dorado country, having entered the Sierra Nevada range. The vastness of these north-south mountains that form part of the boundary between California and Nevada was almost overwhelming. Route 49 is a two-lane highway, well-paved, but it snakes through the folds of these mountains in a winding white line, the dense

forest shutting off any long view of the road ahead. The contrast with the interstate highway was great, and I could not escape a sense of being lost in these deep woods. It would have been a frightening experience for early travellers without reliable maps; for travellers from Japan, familiar only with the mountains of their native country, the anxiety must have been terrible.

Here in the Sierra Nevada I again experienced the rains of California. As one might expect during that sweltering season **between September and October, the rain was intense. I had barely noticed the darkening sky back on Interstate 80, while I was still half asleep.** The grey above the clouds had now seeped down over the tree-covered mountains, and then that eerie emanation seemed to envelop our car. Rain hammered the woods and highway, throwing up spray, its onslaught extraordinary. As the Pinto raced directly into the rain clouds, it was as though we had plunged into a towering wave. Rain pounded on us, thumping on the roof, ricocheting off the hood; the thought occurred to me that its force could crack the windshield, the wipers spraying glass shards into our faces. As it was, the wipers were almost no use.

To the right of us was an abyss, especially perilous since the US drives on the right side of the road.

The downpour stopped just as suddenly as it had come upon us. The rain clouds scudded on, and the sky began to clear. It was such a sudden change that nature seemed to be mocking us mortals as we ventured into these mountains. A beautiful blue sky opened up before our astonished eyes; the rain was gone without a trace. The speed of its withdrawal left us wondering if the whole thing had been an enchantment, but the grey sky lowering over Auburn assured us that it was quite real.

The elevation in this area seemed quite high. Traces of the downpour were fast disappearing, as if being wiped away. Droplets of water glistened on the trees in the sunlight. The road had emerged from the mountains into a plain, or at least so it seemed from the gentleness of the rolling hills and the sight of cattle and horses grazing. This was plateau country. Seven miles further on, we came to Cool. If you turn left here on Highway 193 and go through Greenwood, you arrive at the site of the Black Oak Mine, which once produced a million dollars in gold.

Practically all the historical sites from here on are related to the gold mines. Everything harks back to the Gold Rush, from the Bayley House, once a landowner's splendid home but now in disrepair (wild

grapevines grew along the eaves, heavy with tiny fruit), to the statue of James Marshall pointing to the spot of his great discovery.

It was not out of any lust for gold that I had taken the trouble to come this far on the road to Coloma, however. I was following the trail of an unfortunate young girl from Japan whose life had ended sadly, all too soon, here in this foreign land.

3

El Dorado had already betrayed the shining hopes of its name by the time she came to travel on this road; the gold fever had long passed.

The aforementioned year 1848 was the first year of the Kaei era in Japan. In France, it was the year of the February Revolution. The following ten years saw the peak of the gold fever come and go; a look at the map of ghost towns and abandoned mines will reveal that most of them date to the 1850s, the 1860s at the latest. Twenty years of madness – the last year of which corresponds to the first year of the Meiji era, 1868. That period paralleled a time of upheaval throughout the islands of Japan over foreign incursion and internal political change. The coincidence, as the nineteenth century entered its second half seems almost to have been a harbinger of the modern age.

The girl whose trail I was following landed in San Francisco in the spring of 1869. The gold fever had cooled; as if embarrassed by its explosive growth, Sacramento was losing population. I found her name recorded in a guest book at the Occidental Hotel in San Francisco. I imagine that the people of the time must have taken a special interest in this young woman from Japan.

I stopped in an antique shop in Coloma to ask about her. It was close to the south fork of the American River, and I wondered if she had come by that route.

“I don’t know anything about her myself,” the elderly woman with thick glasses said, lifting a stout finger, “but just up the road is Pilot Hill. If you go west through there, you come out at Folsom; it’s the shortest way to get to Sacramento. In Folsom you might meet someone who knew her. I’ll bet she’d be happy if she knew you came all the way from Tokyo just to do this. But old Mrs Veerkamp – I wouldn’t go see her if I were you. She hasn’t been the same... ever since the war.”

Peering at me, as if trying to guess my age, she said that Mrs Veerkamp had turned against the Japanese after losing a son in the Pacific in the Second World War. She sounded a little sorry for me. I bought a wooden Indian-head nickel from her, and we drove on towards Folsom.

Folsom these days is little known, other than for its dam and federal prison. After arriving there, I backtracked along the road. I wondered if the young woman and her companions had felt close to their destination as they travelled this route. Deep woods bordered the road; a stream played hide-and-seek along the left side. I hear you can catch trout, salmon, and catfish in this stream. Stepping onto the dry gravel edge, I caught glimpses of glitter in the water when the angle of the sun was right: flakes of gold. It doesn't repay the effort, but I understand there's been renewed interest in it recently. There's still stuff in the stream bed that the Marshall might have been happy to hold in his fingers. The early travellers from Japan might have stopped their covered wagons as they rattled along this unfamiliar road and dropped a line into these waters. Fresh trout or salmon would have been a blessing after unfamiliar meals in this alien country.

That night I stayed at the Sierra Nevada House III, an old-fashioned hotel. It was raining again the next morning, gently. The cold high-country air and scenery made me think for a moment that I was near Lake Yamanaka, at the foot of Mount Fuji. Dense fog billowed in, hiding the mountainside in its swirl. It wasn't far now to Gold Hill – no, this was already part of it: there had been old houses along the way; some advertised wine tastings.

Driving on through Coloma with its little post office and old jail, we took the narrow, shady shortcut towards Placerville. A neat, small building immediately came into sight on the left – the sign read “El Dorado County, Gold Trail Elementary School”. The Veerkamps' farm was just ahead. The Veerkamps had originally been managers on a ranch that once covered the better part of Coloma township. The family now owned extensive farmland in this area. Cattle were grazing contentedly in the pasture. I would probably have missed the farm had I not seen VEERKAMP on the mailbox. There was an abandoned hundred-year-old, two-storey farmhouse with a wraparound porch. There was an enormous *keyaki* tree – a zelkova – one that probably had been brought from Japan and planted here. With its dilapidated fence the place looked like a ruin, but there was a garage out front and a young man was about

to pull out in a truck. As I was straightening their crooked sign, the young man got out to greet me, his dog running alongside.

He introduced himself as Philip. He looked about twenty-five or twenty-six; he said he and his family lived here. He himself was the middle child of three children; a sister was the youngest.

“I've heard about the Japanese girl,” he said. “That sure was a sad story. I think Henry was in love with her.” This Henry was Philip's great-grandfather's younger brother, and had, Philip explained, remained a bachelor all his life because of her.

In the light rain, we walked back to the school and climbed the hill behind it. The view from there is fine. There's a single oak tree and some outcroppings of rock on the hilltop, nothing else; the whole broad hillside felt to me like a cemetery. From the hilltop, you can see the gentle rise and fall of the Sierra Nevada ridgeline as it stretches to the north-west across the deep valley of the American River; between the ridges, thick fog was creeping along the mountainside.

Her grave was there, on top of that hill. The marble headstone faced due east. It was pure white, as if carved just yesterday.

IN MEMORY OF
OKEI

On the back of the stone, there was an inscription in oddly formed ideographs:

JAPANESE EMPIRE, FOURTH YEAR OF MEIJI

The ideographs signifying “month” and “day” were there, but the actual month and day were not. They had not been worn away by time; they had never been filled in. In the centre, larger than the rest, was:

OKEI NO HAKA

The grave of Okei.

1

Okei was not at home when the news arrived. She was walking through the powdery snowfall, carrying a basket of persimmons. She would later recall the startling brightness of the ripe fruit against the universal whiteness of the snow.

The streets leading to the main north and west gates of the castle were cleared and tamped down at the start of each day, but the whirling snow had been falling since morning and was now half a foot deep. Okei was on her way home from her relatives' house in Bakuromachi – the Horse Traders' Quarter.

As she walked towards the castle, the mounted samurai came galloping up behind her, as if racing, kicking up the snow. The horses' breath steamed white in the air. The samurai each wore a cape and a flat, black-lacquered helmet. She could remember the hems of their capes fluttering, but not much more.

She hurried to the side, her back against the long tile-capped wall of the mansions of the senior retainers that lined the street. The three horses thundered around the corner, spraying snow. Okei ducked instinctively as a lump of snow came flying at her, causing her to lose hold of the basket in her hands. The persimmons went flying. As she reached to pick up the fruit, she was struck by the sight of them half-buried in the snow. "How beautiful..." she thought. She had already forgotten about nearly being trampled beneath the horses' hooves.

The persimmons were common in the region. They were called *mishirazu* – "the heedless". Travellers seeing them on the tree for the first time were always astonished at their rich display; at times it seemed that the limbs would break from the weight of the fruit. As they were bitter, it was the custom to pack them in barrels of sake to remove the astringency. The name *mishirazu* might have come from their seemingly reckless fecundity, or it might have been applied to those who ate too many of them. Okei's family did not have one of these trees; her aunt

had given her the persimmons in thanks for the *mochi* – the pounded rice dumplings – that Okei had brought to her.

“What are you doing there, child?” someone said to Okei. “Don’t be such a slowpoke. Your persimmons are going to freeze.” It was a young samurai, wearing a hood woven of coarse ramie.

“Oh, thank you. But they’re so pretty where they are.”

“You’re an odd girl, aren’t you? Here, give me the basket.”

The warrior began briskly picking up the persimmons and putting them back in the basket. They were at their peak of ripeness, ready to eat; the cold would ruin them if they sat too long in the snow. Okei hastily joined in.

The young samurai spoke brusquely, but his calm eyes smiled at her from the shadows of his hood. As he stood up, he turned towards the castle gate.

“They were riding very hard,” he said. He seemed bothered as he began walking towards the castle.

“Oh, sir...” Okei began to call after him, then abruptly swallowed her words. She wanted to know his name, but could not ask. Even in ordinary circumstances a conversation in public between a young man and a young woman would have raised eyebrows in this feudal town; in this case there was also the factor of class. No young girl who was a commoner dared speak with a samurai, even of the lowest rank, wearing the two swords that marked his superior status. It was only because of the weather that there had been no witnesses, for custom would have kept him from stopping to help her as well. Okei was fifteen, or sixteen by *kazoe* – the Eastern reckoning, which counted the year of birth as one. Being small for her age, however, she could have been mistaken for a child.

Okei arrived at her family’s house in Zaimokumachi – the Lumbermen’s Quarter – to find her father plying his plane, one shoulder bared despite the cold weather. As a skilled and experienced cooper, Bunkichi always had plenty of work. He was honest to a fault, good-natured and easily flattered.

“At work, Father? Isn’t today the fifteenth? It’s a holiday, you know.”

“Ay, I told them so too, but they want everything in a hurry. I wanted to tell them to wait, but I couldn’t say no.”

“But today’s Women’s New Year’s Day, when we all get a year older.”

“Right, but it would be a shame to stop in the middle of a job.”

Her mother Okiku cast a resigned look towards Bunkichi, then smiled at Okei. “After all, your father *is* a man, dear,” she said, as if to say he would naturally have no interest in Women’s New Year’s Day. After some coaxing with the offer of the persimmons that Okei had taken the trouble to bring home, he finally relented and put down his plane.

No one knew why the women in this region celebrated New Year’s Eve half a month late on the fourteenth of January, counting the years of their age from the next day, while the men folk did so on the last day of December. It was just “the women’s birthday”. Okei had questioned her mother about it once, but Okiku had just sent her away saying, “It’s been that way since long ago.”

For this holiday they made a great number of *mochi* shaped like silkworm cocoons, or *mayudama*. Each family’s household shrine was decorated with these *mayudama dango*, skewered on long twigs. These dumplings were normally made with rice flour, but her mother said that in Hinoemata, the village where she was born, they had made theirs with millet or buckwheat flour since there were no rice paddies nearby. The practice had probably originated among farm families as an invocation for good harvests, but now it was an annual custom among the townspeople as well.

The fourteenth and fifteenth of January were thus busier and more pleasurable for the women and children of Aizu-Wakamatsu than the three days of the actual New Year’s observance. There was great excitement over the special events: bonfires in honour of the God of Boundaries – *Sai no kami* – built with last year’s straw religious ornaments; masked revellers in demon masks and costumes going from house to house seeking gifts of food and drink; groups of children parading with bamboo and straw effigies called *tsutsunbō*, trailing on ropes behind them.

Eating a *mishirazu* persimmon, Okei was dying to tell the story of meeting the samurai. The image of his calm eyes and dashing profile in the shadow of his hood was burnt into her mind, but she was at a loss to put it into words. *A young samurai was nice to me.* That would be embarrassing. She blushed at the very thought of it.

“It looks like you’re drunk on that persimmon, sister,” her brother Kumatarō remarked. He was two years her junior.

“It’s just the heat from the fire.”

“But you’re getting pinker and pinker.”

“Be quiet. Eat, and quit your chattering.”

“Still looks funny to me.”

Okei wondered if she had been seen. Her cheeks felt as though they were afire. Putting down the persimmon, she pressed her hands to her cheeks and rubbed them in a panic. As she rubbed, her cheeks only flushed the more.

Kumatarō was staring wide-eyed at her. Perhaps because he was the eldest son, he tried to play the part of the older brother at times; it may also have been the local tradition of warrior discipline, shared even by the townspeople, that had nurtured a sense of propriety in him. For Okei, being watched like this was more than she could bear. “What are you looking at? Don’t sit there playing the grown-up. Go outside and drag the *tsutsunbō*,” she cried, glaring at him.

Their mother Okiku joined in, shooing him out: “Don’t be dawdling around here. Hurry, get going so you can get on back.”

“All right, let’s go!” Kumatarō shouted, rounding up his younger brother and sister and running out of the house. Pulling the effigies, groups of children were marching around the snowy streets chanting:

Here comes Lord Tsutsunbō!

Snakes, stay away! Moles, stay below!

Families along the way threw pomelo peels or splashed water at the effigies, and then offered the children dumplings, rice cakes, or persimmons.

After the younger ones had left the house, Okiku poured herself a cup of tea and turned towards Okei with relief. When they were alone together, she sometimes looked at her daughter as a younger sister. Okiku herself had married young. At times the two of them were even taken for sisters, just a little further apart in age than usual.

“Last year was Father’s year to shed his misfortune,” the mother said. “Now it’s my turn. I’ll have to go buy a new bamboo blowpipe for the fire tomorrow.”

Bunkichi was already back at work. Looking up from the barrel he was shaping, he said, “Yes, throwing away my loincloth wasn’t easy, you know.”

The three of them burst out laughing. At forty-two, a man must throw away a loincloth to avoid misfortune during that unlucky year. It was different with women: in their year of misfortune, it was the custom

to throw away a well-used blowpipe. The gesture was not one of abandonment so much one of renewal of household duties.

Okiku had not brought up the subject just because this was the night to shed bad luck. She had something else in mind. “You’re sixteen now,” she said to Okei. “I was sixteen when I came here as a bride. You were born the following year.”

Okiku’s steady gaze made Okei uncomfortable as the meaning of her mother’s words began to dawn on her.

It was not unusual to hear such talk about a girl of fifteen; Okei had several friends who were already married. She had been relatively slow to mature, however, and she had not thought much about such things as she spent her days shouting and laughing with her sister and brothers.

She of course had occasional thoughts of the opposite sex, being the age she was, but they had been little more than vague notions that the time would come: that as a woman she would eventually be married. Her family was not rich, but her father’s work kept them fed even during the times of want. Okei appreciated her father’s words: “There’s no use looking upward, no use looking downward.” She had no doubt that it was the proper thing to live simply, according to one’s given station in life.

Then that young samurai had come along and left such a powerful impression upon her heart. It was far too pale and transparent an emotion to be called love; in her whole life, Okei had not once experienced such an emotion.

“Okei,” her mother began, her voice taking on a formal tone, “did they say anything to you at the house in Bakuromachi?”

“Nothing, Mother.”

“Grandmother’s not well. She’s feeling very depressed, and so...”

The words did not seem to come easily to Okiku, and Okei began to feel sorry for her mother’s obvious concern. *It’s about marrying me off, isn’t it?* she wanted to say, but she was afraid to do so for fear it might seem she had already been thinking about it. Emotionally, she was unprepared for it. She wondered what sort of man might have asked for her hand, but it seemed presumptuous to ask his name. It was something in Okei’s sensitive nature that made her feel even asking his name could make her responsible for what might follow.

Okei hastily turned towards her father’s workroom. “Father, ours is the only house working on this New Year’s holiday. Wouldn’t you feel better if you waited till tomorrow?”