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The Pearl Diver

Jeff Talarigo



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*the
pearl
diver*

a novel

JEFF

TALARIGO

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*For the 25,000 patients
who lived this story*

And for the two Sams in my life, my grandfather and my son

Settling, white dew does not discriminate each drop its home

—*Soin*

Acclaim for Jeff Talarigo's the pearl diver

“One of the most honest, tender, and inventive books I’ve read in years. Talarigo never steps out of culture, out of voice, out of place; and yet this is a universal story, one of love, one of neglect, one of shame. . . . He can find redemption even in the narrowest corridors of the human spirit.” —Colum McCann, author of *Dancer*

“[A] meditation on endurance and socially sanctioned cruelty. . . . A quiet triumph.” —Chicago Tribune

“Absorbing and original. Talarigo has managed to create a tone and mood that are themselves expressions of a time and a place and a people. The resulting light radiates outward from one small society in postwar Japan—across the waters and the years—to where the reader sits, still deeply immersed after the last page has been turned.” —John Burnham Schwartz, author of *Reservation Road*

“Utterly believable. . . . In Talarigo’s hands, the leprosarium and all the humiliations that go with it take on a mythical aspect, while remaining intimate and specific. . . . *The Pearl Diver* does not feel like a first novel. There is nothing tentative, nothing lacking from this moving story.” —*The Times Picayune* (New Orleans)

“Quietly powerful. . . . This is a lyrically told tale of ugliness redeemed and lives changed by small acts with large consequences.” —Liza Dalby, author of *Geisha*

“Spare . . . lyrical. . . . [Talarigo] has absorbed the delicate timbre of Japanese culture and literature . . . [and uses this] sensibility to paint bold, clean brush strokes that allow readers to envision the true picture. . . . A moving, simple, yet powerful story of how a soul can find a measure of dignity and freedom even in the most daunting circumstances. The life of [Miss Fuji] reverberates within the hearts of the fortunate people who get to discover her.” —*The Anniston Star*

“An absolute, breathtaking gem. . . . Heartbreaking, haunting, but ultimately hopeful . . . a true secret treasure. . . . This one’s the real thing.” —*Asian Week*

“Talarigo has pulled a magnificent pearl of his own from the Inland Sea, a perfectly crafted, beautifully controlled and subtly multilayered story about belonging and isolation that quickly transcends our baser fascination with the dreaded disease.” —*Fort Myers News-Press*

“[A] terrific debut. . . . [A] wise and merciful book. . . . This tautly written tale . . . simmers with quiet outrage not just at the horror of difference that prevails in a society built on conformity, but at the near-universal impulse to strip the sick and outcast of all that makes them human. . . . A moving poem to the tenacity of ordinary human dignity under unspeakable conditions.” —*LA Weekly*

“Lovely, lyrical. . . . A gem you must not miss.” —*Westchester Journal-News*

shores isolation

Her words are the only remaining artifact of those days before she arrived.

Nineteen forty-eight. This day, like all of them during the diving season, began slowly. Fixing the strap on her mask, eating a bowl of barley, mending a tear in the hood of her diving suit, eating dried sardine after dried sardine, smoothing a nick taken out of her tub, thinking that the *kanji* letters she had drawn at the bottom of it needed to be repainted. She ate more barley, some dried seaweed, pickled vegetables, drank green tea. The other divers did the same, not much chatter before the dive, concentrating on loading up on carbohydrates for the grueling couple of hours of diving.

Old man Kenichi and the other assistants waited in the boats to take the divers out a quarter of a mile into the Inland Sea. She carried her empty tub, as they all did, before the dive. Only after, when they were sapped of all their energy, did they want, need help. She sat on the edge of the boat, twisting and rolling her ankles, stretching her back and limbs. Some of the women squeezed into flipper boots, which, not so many years before, they began wearing—they are said to help your speed. That was exactly why she didn't wear them. Maintaining the same pace, the same rhythm, the comfort she had found in the more than fifteen centuries of history, the sixty generations of doing things the same way.

In five minutes, they arrived; the boats swayed a bit before finding their balance. She, the youngest of the divers, waited until the others had done so, then tossed her tub and, feetfirst, joined it in the sea. This was the only time each day that her head didn't lead the way. And it was way out there, in the vast waters, that she was never alone. Cedar tubs all around, freckling the water, the divers holding on to the sides until they let out long whistles, released the tubs, shoved them off toward the nine o'clock sun, and disappeared in order of seniority.

The tubs wobbled on the waves, sometimes taking the morning sun from her, then, just as quickly, giving it back. Her arms tight against her sides, her feet swept in slow, steady strokes; waves tossed and jolted her body, the water dimmer, duller, murkier with each foot she went. Sixty feet down, the light was that of an autumn's half-moon. And down there, for the first time, she moved her arms from her sides, doing handstands underwater, feeling for the familiar. Oysters. Sea urchin. Scallop. Lobster. Seaweed. Abalone. Mollusk.

Sometimes, down there at the bottom of the sea, the hollow cracking of the pick against the rock, the hollow scraping, was sometimes answered very close by. The first time she had heard it, she thought it was an echo, but what she had thought were echoes continued, and when she had turned her right, there was another diver dislodging an oyster, only an arm's length away.

This day, she chipped and pried at an oyster shell with her metal J-shaped pick, and after only a few chops, it was loose and in her hand. Arching her back, she pushed her feet off the rocks, the same pace as going down, arms at her sides. The water lightened the farther she went; halfway up, the silhouette of her tub appeared. Up, up until she popped out of the water, waist-high, settled back, dropped the oyster into the tub.

Both arms, at the elbows, hooked the tub. She wheezed, gasped, hoarse gasping, her lungs battling each other. ~~The spring winds were strong, the sea clouds had made their way to and dissipated over Honshu.~~ The top of the sea was so much warmer than the bottom. Nothing like a mountain. Sixty feet up, a mountain makes little difference in the temperature. Not the sea. Going down is like autumn in winter. Winter into autumn back up, but the thaw is very slow.

Her lungs cleared, her breathing no longer scratchy, she let out a long whistle, released the tub, gave it a shove off in the direction of the sun, and went back into the sea.

For the final time on that day, a day where she had done more than fifty dives, she headed back up, lobster in her viselike grip. She surfaced, wheezing; the taut air squeezed out of her lungs to her throat, then through her chattering teeth. She showed Kenichi her lobster—barely able to hold it out of the water—knowing that he was thrilled because, as always, she shared it with him.

But lunch wasn't on her mind. She was so cold that she couldn't even climb into the boat, so tired that she couldn't even drop the lobster into her tub. The cold and exhaustion fed off each other. With his net, Kenichi scooped the catch from her limp, rubbery arm, dropped it into the tub, again stretched out the long fishing net. This time, her empty hands took it; he pulled, lifted her onto the two-step ladder and into the boat.

The sun was almost directly overhead, and although it was well into the eighties, she would not get anywhere near warm for at least a few hours; some days not at all. In the first couple of months of the diving season, she and the other divers balanced on the edge of hypothermia. The boat closed in on the west shore of Shodo Island. Kenichi was jabbering something, the glare of the sun off the sea blinding. Buyers gathered on the dock ready to purchase the catch. None of it did she notice, just knew it, for every day was the same. Her glassy gaze was distant, far out there somewhere beyond the blue-on-blue horizon.

Kenichi moored the boat to the cement dock, flung a cigarette stub into the water, helped her out, set her catch next to her, which some of the buyers were already checking over.

“Come on; let's get to the divers' hut before you become stiff enough for me to tie the boat to.”

He said that nearly every day and, as if the words were magic, she found herself taking hold of his arm as he led her over to the divers' hut. On the way, she stopped, lowered herself onto the dock, her legs knotted in cramps. She writhed in pain but quickly remembered to try to relax her body. Relax, relax, she told herself, while all the time her body told her to tense, tense. Relax. Leg, neck, back, bottoms of feet. They could strike anywhere. Other divers gave her a quick glance, realizing it was only cramps. She was back on her feet, hobbling to the divers' hut. Again Kenichi reached out for her.

“Can you stand alone?”

“Yes. I'm fine now.” She pushed him away, coughed several times, cleared her throat, spat into the water.

He left her there outside the hut, went back to sort everything. She entered, closed the door, and joined the others, her legs still tight as the knots of rope holding the boats to the dock.

~~Three generations in that hut. Silent as they stripped. Water dripped off the floor, rattling teeth, sucking sounds accompanying the shivers. There was no energy for talk, no need for it. They helped one another with the hard-to-reach places—straps tied in the back of their tops, shedding hoods. She was no longer as self-conscious as she had been in her early months of diving. No longer embarrassed by her chubby but tight body, the gooseflesh, stone nipples, wrinkled hands and feet, tanned face like a mask against her white body, the shaking blue lips.~~

The unheated freshwater pinged off their bodies, only rinsed the outer skin of the sea from them. The other layers never left. Even in the long months of the off-season, she took the smell of the sea with her to sleep each night. She shivered getting dressed, shivered selling her catch, shivered while shivering.

She had had a good day—three small octopuses, a few dozen oysters, two sea urchins, and some seaweed, half of which she had put aside for her lunch, along with the lobster. The lobster that Kenichi had already removed and was preparing.

Wrapped in blankets, they sat in the divers' hut, drinking hot green or barley tea, cradling cups with hands still wrinkled by the sea, fighting not to think of the cold; in different ways, everyone was about distracting their thoughts from it. Mariko liked to hum old songs, wiggling her toes and fingers as much to warm them as to keep rhythm; Yurika fiddled with her Buddhist prayer beads; Yoko read an Agatha Christie mystery.

But for her, she thought back to that August, not even three years before, when she was certain that the water of the Inland Sea was warmer than it had ever been. Almost hot. She had asked one of the divers if there were any underwater volcanoes in the area. The women had looked up from the sorting of their day's catch, but nobody had laughed or teased like they usually did, her being the youngest of the divers, then barely sixteen. It would be weeks before anyone would dare to laugh, all waiting for the elder diver, Miyako, to show them when it would be okay to do so.

“Why do you ask that?”

She was annoyed that her question had slid out; it was only something that she was thinking.

“Why?” the woman asked again.

“It seems that the water is warmer than I can remember it.”

“I've been diving in these waters more than half my life, and I'm old enough to be your mother, and I don't think the water is any different this year than it was before you were born.”

She said nothing else.

The next morning, the eighth day of August, the sea was again warmer than normal; she was certain of it, but she kept inside what she thought. That maybe the heat from Hiroshima—less than a hundred miles away—had traveled from its delta, skirted its way through and under the scores of tiny islands of the Inland Sea, warming the waters around Shodo Island. A hot *tsunami*.

And for that week of days, when the water warmed, the divers had worked quietly. Bawdy jokes tucked away for future ears. Going about their business, like the heated Inland Sea went about its waves rolling in, tide pulling out, rolling in, pulling out, rolling, pulling.

It wasn't until the middle of August that she believed the water had returned to its normal ways. She was in her final few dives when she surfaced and Kenichi told her the diving was finished for the day.

“A few more.”

“No more,” he said.

There was not a tub, except for hers, out on the water. She'd never been there when a diver died, although she had heard about it happening. Maybe this was what it was like. Kenichi rowed to shore. Nobody was shucking oysters; they were standing around, a few leaning against the dock, eyes locked onto feet or rocks or just locked. Another bomb, she thought.

“Where did they drop this one?” she asked.

“The war is over,” said Miyako, her voice raspy, as if she had smoked a couple of packs of Golden Bats every day of her seventy years, although she didn't smoke at all. She called it “a diver's voice.”

“The Emperor spoke. We have surrendered.”

“How . . .” she began to ask, but she followed Miyako's eyes to the small speaker hanging on the pole. She looked at the speaker and kept looking at it, as if she could squeeze words from it. Nothing came out. Some of the people around the dock—fishermen, the divers, shoppers—stunned, numb, others with eyes reddened by tears. She didn't know what to do, or say, or whether or not to believe the unbelievable. The Emperor's voice. Couldn't be true, must be true. She continued staring at the speaker for a long while, but nothing came out of it. Not a word.

But on this day, nearly three years later, as the divers slowly warmed up, so, too, did the sounds at lunch. Oyster shells clapped, clinked atop one another on the ground; hot miso soup was slurped, crunchy pickles crunched, one of the divers let out a fart, starting giggles, billowing into waves of laughter, some laughs coupled with still-clattering teeth, making them laugh all the more. She, too, laughed, but she was always aware of her legs, which could be thrown into cramps at any moment.

Lunch, next to the diving, was her favorite time of day. Her half of the lobster was tasty, boiled in salt water, a little lemon squeezed over the top. She sat the lobster on her barley, alongside the seaweed and several kinds of pickles—radishes, bamboo, cucumbers. Still there was no real talking. A few burps, hiccups, a sneeze, as if that was how they warmed up their voices.

Then a loud scream. Yoko, lucky Yoko, held up a nice large white pearl from inside one of her oysters. It seems as if once a week Yoko finds one, she thought. In her four seasons of diving, she had found nineteen pearls, all at home inside a lacquer box, next to them an eighteen-inch string to measure the length of a future necklace. Yoko must have enough for two necklaces by now, she thought.

And this is how the talking began.

“You seem a little tired today, Chikako.”

“Who, me?” Chikako pointed at herself, the chopsticks still in hand, a mouthful of octopus.

“That fine young husband of hers wouldn’t let her alone last night.”

“My husband?” Chikako laughed.

“I noticed you were walking a little unsteady this morning, even before the dive.”

Again Chikako laughed, holding a mouthful of food, which she chewed and swallowed before adding, “I can hold my breath underwater longer than my husband can hold—” She stopped, letting the silence grow, then took another bite of food, never finishing the sentence. The divers were howling. One of them let a piece of octopus dangle from her mouth, keeping the laughter up.

“How about our young diver there?”

All the women turned her way. She squirmed with nervousness. She was still the youngest of the divers. Every spring, she hoped that a new diver, a younger one, would start so she could move out of that position.

“Looks like she’s been doing some naughty things, too.”

Everyone’s eyes were on her forearm, to which Yumi pointed; everyone anticipated Yumi’s next words.

“Some sucker bite he gave you.”

A few laughs. She looked at the arm, as did everybody. She didn’t know what to say, for she had only noticed it a few days before. The reddish spot about the size of a scallop.

“I bumped it on a rock last week,” she said.

“That’s a sucker bite if I’ve ever seen one,” Yumi added, passing around a pack of sweet red bean cakes. “Only problem is that your lover sure has his direction all wrong. You have to teach him where he’s supposed to put that mouth of his. Has to go lower than that.”

This brought roars from the others; she, too, couldn’t help but laugh. One woman sucked on her arm real loud, adding to the giddiness.

“I hit it during a dive,” she repeated, seared with uneasiness, then went on eating, trying to think of something to say that would move the conversation in a different direction. Miyako, the elder diver, rescued her, as she had done many times.

“In twenty years, your body will be a museum of scars,” Miyako said, tossing an oyster shell. “You can charge for tours.”

She was surrounded by that truth. There wasn't a diver among them who didn't wear the history their work on her body. Scarred, thick-bodied women all of them.

She sometimes had to laugh when she thought of her mother and sister, frail and gentle, nothing like a single one of the divers. She dreaded those days when she had to dress up, never feeling comfortable in those sandals, which forced her short, wide feet into a pigeon-toed walk—shuffle, more like . . . When her hair was plaited and pulled so tightly into a bun, scrunched together by a lacquer comb, she had a headache the entire day, feeling as if the hair would be uprooted. The sash was so tight, it cut off her breath. But even worse than having to wear the kimono was when she was fitted for a new sash, the woman measuring her; she felt her mother's scouring shame at the thickness, the roughness of her daughter.

But as she sat among the divers, she thought of none of that, only when she made her way home each afternoon did those thoughts creep back into and stay with her until the next morning when she left for the sea.

Miyako talked in a loud voice, although she was sitting no more than five feet from any of them. When Miyako spoke, her tanned, leathery skin glistened. But only on her face, feet, hands—permanent mask, gloves, socks. Underneath that heavy woolen blanket, Miyako's skin was as white as that pearl Yoko had found. Her more than forty years of diving had brought her lots of money, a beautiful house on the hillside, the gold teeth, respect. She walked away each afternoon, a nice bulge of money tucked between her breasts from her day's catch. Between her mother-of-pearl breasts.

All the divers called Miyako "Grandma" and meant it respectfully. Miyako guided the divers, but they didn't feel as if she were guiding. Like the time when, as a novice, she had asked one of the divers what was the easiest way to loosen an abalone from a rock and Miyako had stepped in and taken her aside.

"We never share secrets of our work or technique. It is okay to be friendly—many of them I love like sisters, daughters—but remember, we are competing against one another. If you don't get the oyster with the giant pearl in it, I will. And I won't be feeling guilty about it. You must develop your own secrets of the trade. Take them to the grave with you."

Miyako, who had rescued her from all the talk about the mark on her arm, now held out some dried kelp. They were all close enough to smell it on her breath, something that she almost constantly chewed when out of the water.

"Want some?" she asked, holding it out. A few took some and Miyako threw an extra piece at Yuko.

"Here, give this to that husband of yours. Good for the hair, thickens and toughens it up."

"He should be eating buckets of the stuff," one diver shouted.

"What's that?" Miyako cupped a hand over her ear, leaned a bit closer.

"I said he should be eating buckets of kelp," the woman said, raising her voice.

“He should be wearing the stuff,” another shouted back.

Now, she thought, she could relax a little; the focus had been wrestled away from her. But she knew that, like the cramps, it could return at any time.

She Walked the mile and a half home. Not with the same energy with which she had gone to the sea that morning. Tired, but she was always tired on her trips home, not only from the diving or from having to go up the not so steep hill, but tired because she was going away from the sea. And the next day was Sunday, no diving, making the walk even more arduous.

In her bamboo shoulder basket she carried seven oysters and the small mackerel that Kenichi had given her. She passed limestone boulders; even they weren't the same on the way home. In the mornings, there was a little more color to their paleness. She was warmer, much more so than a few hours earlier, and although the late-afternoon sun was still hot, she, at times, was jolted by a sudden chill, sending a shiver running through her body.

Since it was Saturday, she altered her route a little, turning right into the field of olive trees owned by their distant neighbors the Nakamuras. She went to the fifth row and the twelfth tree in it. The same as her birthday—the twelfth day of the fifth month. Without removing the shoulder basket, she dug up the hole, placed a coin with the others inside the small sack, tightened the string, and planted it back into the ground. She evened the soil, patted it down, left the field, whispering a see you next week. Must be nearly five dozen in there now, she thought—one a week each Saturday during the diving season. Saving them for what, she wasn't certain, but for something that would reveal itself in time.

Back on the dirt road, a half a mile from home, the point where the sound of the Inland Sea vanished, but from where she could get a clear view of Honshu, the main island, seven miles away. Sallow pine needle-thin noodles hung drying in the sun. When the sun hit them from behind, they glowed almost like the tiny blue veins against the skin of a baby—thousands and thousands of tiny white veins, she thought.

She increased her pace; her father would be finished shortly and she had to help her mother get things ready for dinner. The house was over the knoll. Sometimes she passed her family working in the rice field; sometimes she could get by without them noticing her. If not, she'd have to help out. The best time to sneak by was late in the summer, when the rice rose high enough that she could barely make out her father's hat when he was hunched over in the field.

She cleared the knoll, and her father had his shirtless back to her, the rice nearly at his knees. He stood there smoking, striking his familiar pose, hands behind his back, head up to the sky as if he were gazing at stars. It was the last of the three smoking breaks that he took each day. She walked faster but as quietly as possible, hoping that he had just begun his break. He had, and she made it all the way to the house without him seeing her. She slid the door open.

“I'm home.” She set the basket of oysters and the mackerel at the entrance of the house. Her mother was in the kitchen, preparing miso soup, using the small clams that she had brought home the day before.

“Did you help your father?”

“No, he’s about finished.”

“What takes you so long getting home?”

“It’s Saturday and we have to clean things up.”

“We could use the help here, as well.”

“I’m busy, too, Mother.”

“You dive for a couple of hours. You’re not even twenty, too young to be tired.”

“It’s hard work, Mother. You should try it sometime.”

“Why are you always talking so loud? You’re right next to me, not way out in the rice field.”

“All the divers talk loud. It’s a habit.”

“Stop the habit when you’re in the house. I don’t want you acting like those crude people.”

“They’re not crude. We work around fishermen all day and we talk loud because of all the noise the sea. I tell you this nearly every day, Mother.”

“You’re shouting again.”

“Maybe the diving is damaging my ears, like all the other divers.”

“And you’re getting to be like all of them. The body and toughness of a man. We’re working on finding your sister a husband, and you’re going to be next. What kind of man wants a woman who is tough and loud-talking?”

“I brought home some oysters and a mackerel. Should I go and clean them up for dinner?”

“Yes. We’ll be eating early; it’s Saturday.”

She went to the front, slid the door shut, saw that her father had finished his final break of the day and was, once again, over the rows of rice. She opened the basket, imagining that she was deep in the sea, the pick in hand, chipping at one of the oysters. That thought didn’t stay with her for long because she knew that very soon her father would be home and she would be serving him tea and dinner and *sake*, and the next day was Sunday, the longest day of the week, a day without the sea.

The exact moment. Her eleventh dive, August 27, 1948, wedged upside down between two boulders. The sea was calm. Struggling with a large abalone, which had its suction cups pasted to a rock. Not thinking about time, but always aware of it. Nearing her limit in her lungs, that rush of excitement on the edge of pain, fear. Daring herself not to let go, for if she did, she knew from hard lessons learned that the abalone would escape between the rocks and she’d never get it. Pulling, prying, using the bar as

wedge. Pulling when she lost her grip on the mother-of-pearl shell and cracked her left forearm off rock, nearly causing her to breathe a deadly breath. The abalone slithered deeper between the rock forever away from her.

Working her way back up, keeping her pace, no matter how much her lungs screamed, urged her hurry. Knowing that she was bleeding, those rocks, volcaniclike rocks, sharp as razors, but strange she didn't feel anything. She surfaced, empty-handed. She took hold of her tub with her right arm, dragged it along the water to the boat. Trailing her, a red blood line. She saw it but didn't even feel the warmth of the blood.

"Looks like you got yourself a nice cut," said Kenichi.

"It's okay. Doesn't even hurt."

Kenichi gave her one of those faces that said he didn't believe a word of it. But it didn't hurt. Looked bad, though. A deep but clean gash in the center of the red spot that she had first noticed a couple of months before. The spot one of the divers had called a "lover's bite." But as she was helped into the motorboat, she thought it must be adrenaline.

Thirteen oysters, three sea urchins. It was only the second time that she had come back early. The first, the day of the surrender.

Only a few more weeks left in the diving season, she thought, watching the foamy tail left behind by the motorboat. Kenichi had bought the boat that spring. She liked the rowboat much better. She wanted to cover her face now against the smell of the burning oil, but she was holding the towel against her arm, red seeping into it. She anticipated, waited for the pain to match the ugliness of the wound. Knew that it should hurt, knew this from past falls, past pains. And even before reaching the shore, she was readying her mind for the next day, when she would have to dive through the pain.

But the pain never came. Traces of it near her wrist and up by the bicep, still that mysterious numbness on her forearm. She skipped the next two days of diving, fearing an infection, went to the sea on her bicycle, her older sister's really, but she had awakened before her and taken it. Troubled when she returned home, but at that moment, the breeze from the sea off her face, through her short hair, grazing her underarms, the future, or the past, wasn't in her thoughts.

When she arrived, she felt left out, not because they weren't talking and laughing with her, but because they were all getting ready and the days of the diving season were few. Autumn was near; she could feel it in the air that morning. For her, the most difficult time was the first couple of weeks after the diving season. No sea. Only out in the fields with her family, harvesting rice. Then winter. The sea too cold for even a visit. Six agonizing months. She hated winter—but despised autumn, for it preceded winter, and she felt the harshness of December long before it ever got to her.

A lingering wasp from the remnants of summer. Her only company in that abandoned warehouse. Still, some time before the knock at the door and the food was left outside. Sometimes a little note, sometimes only the thought of one; several times there had been a newspaper.

At first, she wasn't sure whom she was hiding from—her family, the doctor, herself? The

sometime in her first week there, she received a note from Miyako telling her that the police had been to see her. In those early days of hiding, she used to peek through the crack between the metal door watching, listening. Sometimes for hours. And when she would see Miyako coming, she'd place her palms against the door, waiting for the knock, and she would keep them there, clinging to the very last pulse that it left behind. Miyako would set the food on the ground, scurry off, not too fast so as to call attention to herself, not once glancing back at the warehouse, although she had imagined, knowing how that it tortured Miyako not to do so.

Miyako began leaving the food in paper bags, not in a plastic lunch box like she had that first day. She was again at the door, peeking through the crack, when Miyako returned the second day. She stared in disbelief at the fear on the face of the strongest woman she knew, disbelief as she saw her grab a metal pipe and then use it to push the empty plastic lunch box away, pushing and pushing until she could no longer see her through the crack in the door. It was the only time that she allowed herself to cry, to feel some self-pity. After that, when she had finished eating, she rolled up the paper bags and tossed them into the corner of the warehouse.

Dear, sweet Miyako. She knew the day the doctor told her the news that if there was anyone she could tell, it was Miyako.

More than a month had passed since she had cut her arm; diving season had finished, a week in October. Then, the second spot on her lower back—that one, too, had no feeling. And the constant stuffy nose. She left her family to the rice harvesting and went the three miles into town to the doctor's.

She had heard about the disease, how you should stay away from those people, how they were a burden to the country during the war. Filthy. Cursed. Should she fear herself? No, only that she had to tell her family. That, she didn't even let herself think of, didn't stop thinking of it. She didn't know where to go. Her family still had most of that afternoon left in the fields. She had promised to be home to help. But what were promises at that time?

She walked away from town, feeling as if everyone she passed knew about her. But how could they? None of her spots were visible under her thin cotton jacket. A girl passing through town. How soon before everyone knew? Before the doctor told one person, and then it would spread like the fine red sand that blew in from China every winter? Covering everything.

She had never been to Miyako's house, had only been as far as she was that afternoon, up by the thicket of bamboo along the path leading to it. That was where she waited, trying to allow the sunlight weaving its way through the bamboo, to distract her from her thoughts, the flecks of dust floating, the illuminated insects flittering through the beams. Tried.

Although the diving season was over, Miyako still went to the sea during autumn, where she passed a few hours each day. Only a week had passed, she thought. The following diving season twenty-nine weeks, two hundred and three days, to go. Or more. That thought was too much. She tried going back to the midafternoon sun and the bamboo.

She saw Miyako approach around the bend, about fifty yards down the path. Walking deliberately,

strong, short steps—a half waddle. When Miyako was about ten yards away, she stepped out in front of her.

Neither of them took a step closer. Did she already know? Impossible. But maybe not so impossible. The look on Miyako's face told her that she knew, but maybe it was her own look that told Miyako something was terribly wrong.

“What brings you up here?” Miyako asked. Still, neither had made the next step, forward or backward, locked in the moment like at the bottom of the sea, all time stopped.

“I'm sick.” The words choked and garbled.

“Sick?”

“Remember when I cut my arm a couple of months ago?”

Miyako didn't speak, only nodded.

“I'm sick,” she said again.

Miyako took a step toward her, then another.

“Leprosy.”

Miyako didn't move, her next step severed by the word.

“From that cut?”

“No, the spot was there before I cut my arm. Last week, I found another—on my back.”

Miyako appeared as though she wanted to retrace those two steps she had just taken, but her stubbornness wouldn't allow it.

“What are you going to do?”

“The doctor says I have to go to a sanatorium.”

“When?”

“I have to talk to my family first. Soon. The doctor told me that I can never dive again because I could spread the disease through the water to the other divers, to the children who play there every summer.”

Neither moved nor talked. A distant ship wailed its horn. She took a couple of steps toward Miyako, bowed deeply to her, and walked away, looking back only once when she reached the bend, and Miyako was still standing where she was when she had left her.

Back in the warehouse, a couple months' worth of paper bags pyramided in the corner, she waited for

Miyako's knock on the door. She thought of her family and how it had been six weeks since harvest. How she had never returned, only left Miyako's, and, after wandering aimlessly for hours, how she had ended up in the warehouse. How she had opened the door, closed it, fell asleep, woke up, felt hungry, wrote a note and then placed it on Miyako's door, and the next day there was a knock and the lunch box sitting outside.

And that was how it had been every day, and for how many more, she couldn't even imagine. She knew only that she was standing up because she had heard the knock; it was time to get her lunch and allow the five seconds of sunlight, which the open door provided, to flood into the warehouse.

Without peeking through the crack, she opened the door. There was no paper bag out there, only two policemen. She stepped into the afternoon—the cloudy skies lashed at her eyes—closed the door behind her, knowing that the dim bar of sunlight that had snuck into the warehouse had already been strangled.

The policemen led her away, keeping a distance. She turned and wondered about that day's lunch and when it arrived, how long would it sit outside before the rats got to it, how long before Miyako stopped leaving the food?

She faces the back of the man digging the oars into the water, watching him bury her past in the heavy mist of the Inland Sea. His rowing is fluid but tense. Icy waves slap at them. Today, she wishes for Kenichi's motorboat. If the man didn't know where they are going and what is awaiting them on the other shore, they would probably be facing each other right now, perhaps even speaking. If he didn't know where they are going and what is awaiting them, maybe he would even glance at her once in a while. A normal-looking nineteen-year-old girl.

She opens the cloth in which the lunch has been wrapped. Cold, hard rice. The rice balls simply covered in dried seaweed. If this were a normal day, she would consider herself lucky. Rice. A rare treat all through the war and even now, three years after. She eats two of them. No enjoyment at all, only to fill her up. She asks the man if he would like some. She sees his shoulders tighten, perhaps two strokes with the oars a little out of rhythm. Quickly, he recovers. His silence colder than the rice or the wood of the boat or her ears.

Looking over the side, she tries imagining the depth of the water, but she can't concentrate. She leans back and holds her breath, counting the strokes. Fifteen. Twenty. Forty. She could continue keeping the breath within her, but she stops, noticing that the mist has thinned out and that Nagashima is close. Close enough to tell that the trees are pines and not cedars. If the water wasn't so rough, she is sure she could see the bottom of the sea. Jump right off and touch it. Her place.

He breaks his rhythm, rowing faster now, maintaining that pace until they hit the rocky bottom, throwing her against the side of the boat.

He never even steps off the boat, but for the first time on this long day, he faces her. She, on the cement dock; he, working the oars once again. Always with his back to the place he is going, facing the place he is leaving. She watches him edge away. He must be exhausted, but, wanting so desperately to get away from this place, he rows and rows. But he isn't that far away, perhaps fifty

yards, when he does stop. The boat wobbles, shifts under his weight as he removes the left oar from its latch; he picks it up, as far away from the blade as is possible. He leans over and, using the blade of the oar as a shovel, scoops and flings into the water the two rice balls she left behind for him. They disappear like stones. He replaces the oar and begins digging, his back to her past.

AS our generals hang in the December wind, the time line of her isolation begins. It is the future Emperor's fifteenth birthday, forty-one years before he will begin his reign.

She stands here on this dock—the receiving dock—watching the man row until he, like the rice balls, fades into the sea. From this day on, it will forever be different for her. Not hatred—she will never hate it—only something that separates. It had always been something that she thought connected—~~island to island, fishermen to home.~~ But today it is, and always will be, a separator.

Two men, wearing doctor's masks, lead her along the narrow dock, past several rowboats much like the one she arrived on. They pass a small shack, many kinds of farm equipment under its tin roof. She feels sick to her stomach, the cold rice like lead. She stops, catches her stomach from leaving her.

“Hurry up, there's much to be done,” one of the men says, a few steps ahead.

A couple of deep breaths help a little and she follows the men into a large building, splotches of ivy clinging on the outside walls. A wooden shoe box is off to her right. The ceiling is higher than any she has ever seen before. She removes her shoes, and as she is about to place them in the box, a woman wearing thick rubber gloves comes out of nowhere, rips them from her hands, and drops them into a burlap sack.

“Into that room and place all your belongings in one of those bags.” Still, the men are several steps away from her. Never closer.

Dirty curtains, covering the glass on the door, are lifted by the wind brought in through the entrance. She steps inside, and before she can even close the door, her stomach is lost all over the floor. The smell of chemicals staggers her. The room is large, made even larger by the ceiling. A nurse hands her a bucket and a rag.

“Close that door and clean this up. When you've finished, go over there behind the curtain and remove everything.”

She throws up again. The nurse's rubber boots flop as she hurries away.

She cleans up, a stain left behind on the floor, then goes over and opens the curtain. A woman, old enough to be her mother, sits naked on a dirty mattress. Her left hand in front of her pubis, her right can cover only half of her breasts.

“Excuse me. I'm sorry.”

She walks out of the curtain-partitioned room.

“Hurry up and get undressed.” The nurse points her back to where she has just left.

The older woman turns her back to her, the long, bent fingers still where they were when she first entered. Red spots on her back. Some larger the farther down one looks. Her hair is like a swallow nest after a typhoon, strewn all over, eggs long gone. Her face, round as a ramen bowl, is untouched except for one red spot under her right eye. She moves as far away from the woman on the bed as she can, turns her back, undresses. She hides her change purse inside the pocket of her jacket. The room is cold; many times she has been colder—those early-May dives—but the shame she feels gives the cold a raw edge to it.

The curtain snaps open. She stands, for the first time in her life, naked before a man. Like those of the woman on the edge of the bed, her hands, too, instinctively cover the most private parts of her being.

“Move your arms and stand up straight,” the doctor orders. She hears the words, but his mouth and nose are covered by a white mask, making it difficult to follow what he says.

“Stand up straight!” She sees his mask move up and down, again hears the words, sees the doctor’s eyes behind black-rimmed glasses that sit crooked on his nose. He steps toward her. She uses the side of the bed as a support but feels her knees weaken, and with her arms still covering her, she hits the floor. The ceiling is a clear blue sky. Endless. The older woman speaks words she doesn’t understand as her hideous claws touch her face.

“Don’t touch me!” she screams. “Nobody touch me!”

The older woman jumps away, her hands back to her body.

“Get up so we can disinfect you,” yells the doctor.

She reaches for her clothes, but they are gone; stabs at a bedsheet, but there is only a mattress. She starts to cry.

“Stop this foolishness.”

The doctor clenches her arm, jerks her up by it. He has her above the elbow, the thick rubber glove slimy cold, like a raw oyster in January. She’s taken into another room. The doctor tells her to lie on the bed, a plastic sheet atop it. First on her stomach. He checks behind her ears, the nape of her neck, under her arms, down her back, all the time making these sounds like he is sucking his teeth. He spreads her legs; the glove hurts as he touches her down there, makes all her skin ache, as if she were sliding naked on ice. She notices, on her left arm, a large bruise already beginning to spread from where she fell on the floor. Spreading over the diving scar within the spot. Years ago. She keeps her eyes on the spot, the blue-green-black bruise scattered inside, around it. Keeps her eyes on it, tries to create a map from it. Yakushima. Like the island of Yakushima, round except for a little deviation on the top left side. His hands down the backs of her legs, the soles of her feet.

“Turn over.”

She does, knowing nothing that she is doing. Chilled tears dribble, drip down the side of her face, plunk against the plastic bedsheet.

His hands over her breasts, against her stomach, inside her, down her thighs, across her divining, scarred knees, her feet, between her toes.

“Get up,” he says, leaving the room.

The worst is over. You have been through the worst. She keeps telling herself this.

A nurse comes in and leads her to the back of the building. Colder than she has ever been. Startling smell of chemicals.

“Keep your eyes closed.”

She is covered, drenched, in the chemical odor. A second layer of skin. She inhales, trying to strangle tears that want out. Her throat burns, her nose drips, and her eyes release, this time, boiling tears. Her skin scoured all over, but still the cold rubber glove between her legs. She is led out of the room, given a thin robe, and is standing before a young man at a desk. Sweating. Shivering. Her upper left arm hurts where the doctor grabbed her, the red spot on her forearm without feeling, the bruise spreading.

“I have a few questions for you, but these are only for our records. Your life begins here right now at this very moment. Do you understand that?”

“Yes,” she answers.

“How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

“Where are you from?”

“Shodo Island.”

“Okay. Your number is two six four five. Don’t forget it. Two six four five. Repeat it.”

“What about taking down my name?”

“I told you to forget everything. Name and all. Wipe it out of your head as if it were never there. Same for your family. Everything for you begins here today, right now. Your number, what’s your number?”

“Two six four five.”

“Again.”

“Two six four five.”

“Now you must choose a new name.”

“But I have a name.”

“Didn’t you listen to what I told you? You have caused great shame to your family, and for the sake, have your name struck from the family register. As if . . .” He pauses.

“As if I were dead.”

His eyes don’t like what she said.

“Today is the beginning of your past. December the twenty-third, 1948. You are born today. It will be easier on you if you think of it this way.”

“But I haven’t thought of a new name.”

“You have until tomorrow.”

The groaning of the rowboats tied to the wooden dock outside. She thinks that is what she hears. She stares up at the ceiling. She is tired, more tired than the man who has rowed her here. Even he must be home asleep by now.

All around her, on this first night of her isolation, bodies. Some are already spotted like that of the older woman earlier in the day. Others worse than that. Some with faces, limbs already contorted. Several are like her—no visible sign until they are naked. She doesn’t use the blanket, not sure why. She wrapped themselves in it the night before. She curls up within herself, but it is cold. Not as cold as the doctor’s gloves. Never that cold again. She covers her face with her hands to block out some of the disinfectant’s stench, but her hands stink of it, everybody does, this room does, this building, this island. For the first time in years, she doesn’t smell the sea on her skin.

She tries thinking of a name. It doesn’t sound all that difficult to do. Pick a name. When she was little, she often had make-believe names when playing. It was easy. She never thought of it before now, but we are lucky, for the burden of choosing a name is put on the parents, not us. But now she chooses both the parent and the newborn. And not only a first name, a family name, as well.

The woman next to her can’t sleep, either; she’s been moving around all night. She asks the woman’s name. The woman mumbles something that she doesn’t understand. Maybe she is asleep, she thinks. She asks again. Again, she doesn’t understand. A man, a couple of mats away, speaks.

“Mang. Her name is Mang. She doesn’t speak much Japanese.”

“Doesn’t speak Japanese?”

“She’s Korean.”

She doesn’t know what to say. What’s a Korean doing here? The man breaks the silence.

“My name is Shikagawa. Why do you want to know everybody’s name?”

“Because they said I must choose one.”

~~“That’s not easy. You have to think of something happy in your life. Make a name from that.”~~

“We’re not supposed to think of our past.”

“That’s only what they say. They know that’s impossible, but what else are they to tell us?”

“Why did you choose Shikagawa?”

“When I was a child, I used to see a deer drinking from the river near my family’s home. So I chose Shikagawa— deer drinking from the river.”

“That’s beautiful.”

“At least something I have is. That’s why it’s so important for you to give this some real thought. I’ll be quiet now. Good night. I’ll ask you your name in the morning.”

There is a single dream that she has in this first week. Maybe she has so few dreams because she sleeps so little. It is the same dream over and over, very short but exactly as the previous one. The man who rowed her here has arrived back at Shodo Island and he has dragged his boat ashore. And although it is late December, he removes the fingerless gloves from his hands, then his hat, jacket, shirts, socks, pants, underwear, and throws them all in the boat. He empties a container of kerosene over it, tosses a match. Everything is in black and white. Even the flames. The man doesn’t stand there to get warmed by the fire, but runs away naked, and she is here on this shore, watching him through the flames until she sees him no more.

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