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*Terug naar Hiroshima – Return to Hiroshima*

Tr. Brian Doyle

# I

*Hiroshima – Dambara Islamic Centre –  
Mitsuko – 10 March 1995*

*Rokurobei* hunts at night. Do not underestimate the demon's might. When his victims hear his footsteps and see his long neck, it's too late. He seduces if he can, kills if he must. Although his nickname for me as a child was *Aōnyōbo*, a singing female spirit that haunts abandoned imperial palaces, it would be a mistake to overlook the serpent-neck's true nature.

I can only hope *Rokurobei* doesn't find me. After fleeing Hashima Island, I only stayed in Nagasaki for a couple of days. I explained my conspicuous appearance by pretending to be the daughter of *hibakusha*, survivors of the atom bomb from the Second World War. My story sounded plausible: my parents were little more than infants when the bomb exploded and the radiation threw their endocrine system out of kilter, leaving me with an inherited genetic defect. People tended to be politely sympathetic, and some cautiously observed that I was a striking *hibakusha* of the second generation.

Fortunately, I had brought enough money with me from the island. I even managed to waste both time and money in the first couple of days, the result of having spent almost twenty years imprisoned on "ghost island" Hashima. Although I had been able to stay abreast of developments on the mainland via newspapers and magazines, adjusting turned out to be more difficult than I had expected. Hashima is only 15 kilometres off the coast of Nagasaki, and *Rokurobei* will have presumed that I fled to the city when I left

the island. The only other city where I could hope to blend in was Hiroshima. Rokurobei was sure to figure that out sooner or later, but it still gave me something of a head start.

Fate came to my assistance on the train to Hiroshima. A woman in a veil was sitting opposite me and we got into a conversation. Her name was Michio and she had converted to Islam. She took her religion seriously and wore a veil that covered her face as well as her hair. While we were talking, it gradually dawned on me that a chuddar might come in handy. I feigned interest in Islam, and Michio, a zealous recent convert, was clearly anxious to win me over. When we left the train at central station in Hiroshima, she took me with her to the Dambara Islamic Centre, an inconspicuous building with a small brightly painted mosque in a working class district of the city. Michio had believed my story about being a second generation hibakusha without batting an eyelid. My height and loose fitting clothing concealed what was really going on with me. In any event, she made no allusion to it. I had told her that my parents had died within weeks of each other and her husband, a Muslim of Turkish origin, gave me permission to stay in the Centre while I prepared for my initiation as a believer. That was two weeks ago and I've hardly been outside since then, only at night. I know how merciless the one who is pursuing me can be. I've known him all my life. Rokurobei has connections with the police, the business world, politics, and the *yakuza*, the bigwigs of the underworld. I know how wealthy he is, and I know about his origins.

He is a formidable enemy and I am a broken twenty-one year old woman.

The last few days I've had the feeling that the birth is about to happen. I'm afraid that Michio now has her suspicions. She's discrete, says nothing, but I've seen her looking at me.

My waters are ready to break. Tonight I see Dr Kanehari.

*Hiroshima – Dr Kanehari’s private clinic –  
Mitsuko and Dr Kanehari – March 10<sup>th</sup> 1995*

I feel reasonably safe behind the chuddar that covers my face. Fortunately, Japan’s small Muslim population tends not to attract much attention. People pretend not to be interested. We are a discrete people. I pass through the streets unimpeded. I deliberately asked for a late appointment with Dr Kanehari. The teachers at the Dambara Islamic Centre have kept me busy all day long, studying Islam’s hundreds of rules and practices. Many of them are contradictory. The only moments I had to myself were at night in my room. I soon discovered that I could easily slip in and out of the place via a side door. I’m the only one living in the Centre on a permanent basis. After searching the telephone book for Dr Kanehari’s number, I decided to tell him what I wanted without beating about the bush. He was confused at first when I told him I didn’t want to deliver in a hospital and that I wasn’t after an abortion. I had access to television on Hashima Island and in the last year to the internet. I was aware that many Japanese women resorted to abortion because the contraceptive pill isn’t legal. Just about every gynaecologist performs illegal abortions. It’s an excellent source of undeclared income, and something of a blessing after the collapse of the Japanese economy.

I told the doctor that as a Muslim woman I didn’t want to have an abortion, but that my life was in danger after my husband discovered that the baby was a love child and that it was already growing in my belly when we met for this first time eight months ago. He swallowed my story. I told him that I didn’t dare have myself admitted to a hospital for fear that my husband would get wind of it. The doctor asked me how I had managed to conceal my

pregnancy up to now. I dished up a story about my husband being in Turkey for almost five months trying to save the family business and preparing for me to come and join him in the land of his birth. Dr Kanehari wanted to know what I planned to do with the baby. My answer was endearing in all its simplicity: my childless older sister had promised to take care of the baby as if it were her own. My story didn't exactly hang together, but wasn't that the same with every story and every life? In reality, Dr Kanehari was only interested in the substantial sum of money I was offering. Just before leaving for his private clinic, I inspected myself in the mirror. Because of my height, my swollen belly was barely visible, and in recent weeks I had also resorted to a corset. I had unremitting cramps and prayed that day that I would survive until nightfall.

I'm tough, I remind myself, as I scurry through the streets of Hiroshima, map in hand. I am strong and on the verge of despair. The night is warm and humid. People glance at me furtively, at my height, my veil, but they continue on their way, in haste, absorbed by their own lives, their own pasts, their plans for the future.

I am a pale spirit without a past.

The future is in my belly.

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The lenses of Dr Kanehari's glasses are dotted with a myriad of miniature suns, reflecting the lights behind him.

"A little jab," says the doctor.

What? He had told me he was going to induce labour, but had said nothing about an injection.

I want to sit up.

Too late.

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He's sitting in the eagle's nest with a book. That's what I call his favourite place to read and think. On a clear day, you can see the outline of Nagasaki harbour from the top of the tallest apartment building on the island. Boats sail past from time to time. None of them put in to port. At night a flotilla of little boats brings us everything we need.

This was once the most populated place in the world. Our island is only four-hundred metres long and one-hundred and forty wide, but more than five thousand people used to live here.

It's high tide. I stand at the old "saltwater fountain" and look left and right. This is the narrowest part of the island. In rough weather, this kind of weather, the waves sometimes break on the other side. I wait until the sea draws back and then run towards the dirty grey building in front of me. On the ground floor, daylight on Hashima always seems gloomy. The old apartment blocks of weathered reinforced concrete, moss green and slate grey, are built so close together that they block out the light. The entrance to the building is still littered with empty sake bottles, left behind by the last group of mine workers who departed the island twenty years ago.

Every time I enter the inner courtyard of the eagle's nest my eyes are drawn to the empty windows and I'm reminded of the people who once lived here. It's as if they left behind a terse sort of restlessness. Mainlanders say the place is haunted. Maybe they're right. Sometimes you think you can hear voices, sighs perhaps, but it's the old buildings, crumbling. When people leave behind their deeds, their dreams, their desires in the house where they once lived, the walls begin to fester, the ceilings split and the windows crack. The buildings of Hashima seem to exude more darkness with every passing year, more menace, more loneliness. I climb the stairs, walk the corridors. Most of the doors to the tiny apartments have disappeared or are lying on the ground. In some of the flats there's still evidence of the former inhabitants: a torn wall screen adorned with pastel drawings, an old 1950s white-framed TV, delicate teacups in a circle on the floor. Fragile, introverted signs in

brutal surroundings. I look outside through the broken windows: besides the odd spot of green ivy here and there, the rest is grey. The sky is overcast, the colour of old ice. To reach the roof of the eagle's nest I have to take an exterior staircase from the top floor. The sea is menacing today, whipped up, high waves crashing against the fortified walls. The pier at which our supply ships tie up at night is swamped with sea water. When I reach the roof I see him sitting there. He's set up a screen against the wind. His armchair is surrounded by books. He's not wearing western clothes. His black *haori* and *hakama*, the long, pleated culottes once worn by warriors, are impeccable.

"What are you reading?" He makes me nervous. That's why I don't beat about the bush. He forgives me most of the time. After all I'm only twelve.

"A book by a great English writer. Listen: *No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity, but I know none, therefore am no beast.*"

He pinches my cheek with his long fingers.

"I would like..."

I fall silent. Although he's in his late fifties, his hair is still shiny and black, pinned up in a topknot, classic samurai style. His long, gaunt, disproportioned face is expressionless, but his eyes, black as coal and gleaming fearsomely, gauge my mood. I had asked him months before why his eyes always had the same glassy expression. He told me it had to do with an overactive thyroid gland, one or other organ... I've forgotten where it's located. He's always slipping me little nuggets of knowledge, like treats to a dog.

"You would like to leave the island."

I nod, avoid his gaze.

"I miss my mother, friends to play with. I want to go to school."

"You learn more from me than any school can teach you."

That's not what it's about. There are a thousand things I want to explain to him but can't because they're scattered inside me like the pieces of a puzzle and I can't fit them together.

"I want to live."

He lithely unfolds his limbs. I am more than six foot tall, but he's head and shoulders taller. His frame is slightly crooked and his neck, his impossible long neck, I can't avoid staring at it. I've been spared his neck, at least to some extent.

"Live? Life is about going after your goal and conquering yourself."

*Your goal isn't my goal, I want to say.*

He takes my hand and pulls me towards the handrail. He points to the countryside. From this distance, Nagasaki harbour is virtually invisible. A few bulbous, dark shapes allude to its presence. Today there are no ships sailing by.

"You're not an animal," he says, "but people will treat you like one."

"And you," I blurt, without being aware of what I'm doing.

The hand on my shoulder feels heavier.

It takes a while before he answers.

"Me too. That's why I know no pity."

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When I awake from the anaesthetic, with images of Hashima flowing out of me like water and making way for reality, I don't see Dr Kanehari's face, I see my father.

"Daughter." His weighty voice sounds broken behind the surgical mask. He says something about the *kiku*, the divine chrysanthemum, symbol of the *kikusui*, the imperial bloodline, but because of the turmoil in my head and the nauseating lightness in my belly I find it hard to understand what he's talking about.

What's he doing? He's turning away. I look at his back through the white coat he's wearing. I remember that I used to think my father's body was made of veined granite.

"Daughter," he says with his back still turned. "Did I make your life such a misery that you had to give birth like an animal?" His voice sounds like the voices in a dream, plaguing you from the

depths of a gurgling well. *Give birth like an animal?* I want to answer him, but I can't. What is there to say when Rokurobei catches up with you?

### 3

*Hiroshima – Peace Monument – inspector Takeda  
and his assistant Akira – March 10 1995*

Every corpse inspector Takeda's job confronted him with made him think of his father. But the mutilated body of the baby found by the cleaning crew at the Peace Monument – dedicated to Sadako Sasaki – reminded him of his mother. When Takeda was a teenager, his mother told him about the first baby she delivered in the Dutch East Indies, which she tossed into the camp latrine shortly after its birth in 1943 with the permission of the Japanese guard who had assaulted her. Takeda, her second son, had been spared the same fate because his mother was still in her eighth month when the women's camp at Pangkala-Balei in South Sumatra was liberated after the Japanese capitulation. Takeda thinks back to Hubertus Gerressen in a fit of melancholy. That was the name Barbara Gerressen gave him fifty years earlier, the name he no longer bears.

Takeda doesn't know his father's name. Barbara Gerressen didn't know it either, or refused to mention it. All her life she referred to him as "that fornicating buck".

His mother's moods and convictions were extremely volatile, all down to the painful experiments the Japanese occupier conducted on her and many other women in the camp. If you could seduce one of the guards, stir his lust, you were better off. Barbara's Dutch pragmatism almost dictated it. Result: a fertile belly bulging for a second time. Destined for the latrine as before, but the liberation got in the way. After the camp, Barbara Gerressen loved and hated

her son with enormous intensity for the rest of her life. She never knew why. Perhaps she thought too much about her firstborn.

The inspector stares at the bullet-shaped memorial to Sadako Sasaki, the twelve-year-old little girl who was standing on Misasa Bridge when *Little Boy* exploded above her head and toxic radiation descended on the city like a blanket. She died ten years later from leukaemia. Sadako spent the last year of her life folding paper cranes because a clairvoyant had predicted she would survive if she reached a certain number. Takeda couldn't remember how many, only that she had folded many more than the required number when she died with malignant bulges on her neck and throat. The hibakusha later picked up her habit. After every school trip, hoards of nervous, giggling schoolgirls leave behind a veritable mountain of finely folded paper at her monument.

The inspector kneels beside the swollen lump of flesh. Colourful paper cranes are piled up next to the tiny corpse. Under his breath Takeda curses the person who discovered the body and phoned the gutter tabloid *Shukan Gendai* before warning the police. It must have been one of the cleaners, but everyone's denying it. Takeda is convinced that they all received an equal share of the tip-off money. He has *Shukan Gendai*'s local photographer traced, accusing him of disturbing a murder investigation and removing forensic evidence from a crime scene. The man defends himself by insisting that he'd come to photograph the monument for an "opinion piece" prior to the commemoration of *Little Boy*'s fiftieth anniversary and "stumbled over the corps" in the process. As a good citizen he had taken photos first and then informed the cleaning crew. His photos will appear on the front page under a glaring headline.

"Inspector?" Wary-eyed and bespectacled detective Akira appears behind Takeda's back striking a quasi-military pose.

"Yes?"

"The forensic people are here. They want permission to start work."

In his youth, inspector Takeda's hair wavered between blond and red, just like his mother Barbara Gerressen. Now it was turning grey. His angular features had a rugged hue that still glistened like copper in the sun. Takeda has always considered the enforced racial fusion that led to his birth a mistake. Large, plump, cumbersome hands and feet, robust shoulders. The inspector moves like the trained judoka he is and has been for years.

“Wait for a bit, Akira.” The inspector stoops closer to the tiny corpse. The subdued light under the monument casts a uniform glow over the baby's blackened skin. The body looks like a doll that's been baked at too high a temperature. Its head is swollen and misshapen. Hardened fibrous tissue protrudes from its eye sockets. A lump of raw flesh – the tonsils? – bulges from its lipless mouth. The naked little body has the colour and texture of black porcelain. But the crotch is distended, a snow-white protuberance, the genitals melted like congealed egg-white. The inspector pulls on a thin latex glove. He doesn't touch the corpse. His hand makes a gentle waving motion above the head, then the heart region, then the crotch.

Akira turns away. As a modern Japanese man he abhors such displays. But time after time it riddles him with superstition and sends a slight shiver down his spine.

Takeda's face remains motionless, writing off his colleagues' claim that he has a sixth sense to sheer accident and his share of luck. But a feeling overcomes him nevertheless that's best described as the moment before a tornado lets loose. A tingle of electricity runs across his shoulders from left to right. He picks up an intensity of pain and anxiety he's never experienced before.

#### 4

*Hiroshima – Dr Kanehari's private clinic –  
Mitsuko and Dr Kanehari – March 10 1995*

“Pseudocyesis,” says Dr Kanehari. My father’s face, always so inscrutable and stern, with those inward looking eyes almost impossible to engage, refuses to leave the room. It floats past in a slow blur, but I can still feel his presence, so powerful that I begin to doubt that he was a dream. My legs are cold, my head trapped in an airless bubble. At the same time my limbs feel tense, ready to escape. I can see tiny droplets of sweat on Dr Kanehari’s forehead, crystal clear, as if through binoculars.

“What do you mean?”

The doctor looks at me as if he doesn’t understand why I should be asking him a question. “Phantom pregnancy. It’s rare, but the women who suffer from it are usually so desperate to get pregnant that they experience all the symptoms: nausea, occasional vomiting, increased weight, sensitive, painful breasts, excessive sleep.”

“But...”

“You called me,” the doctor interrupts. “You didn’t want the foetus removed. You wanted to have the baby and give it to your sister. It was only after I agreed to your request that I realised you weren’t pregnant.”

“But I felt it kick! I talked to...”

Kanehari shakes his head. He tries to placate me. I sense he’s hiding something.

“Phantom pregnancies are often related to hysteria, even temporary insanity, a psychosis resulting from an enormous and merciless longing.” The doctor appears to be content with his last observation.

“Why did you put me under?”

“Standard procedure.” Kanehari joins his hands, palm to palm. “You should understand that given the circumstances I’m obliged to charge my full fee, as we agreed. I presume your fit enough to leave. Now you know what’s happening, your body will quickly adapt. You can already see that the swelling has largely disappeared.”

I get down from the bed and feel a little dizzy, nothing more. And he's right: my belly isn't completely flat, but it's a lot less swollen than it was this morning. Even the oedema in my lower legs is virtually gone. I feel no pain between my legs. I saw my father as I awoke from the anaesthetic, but that must have been my imagination, nothing unusual after a period of sedation. In spite of everything, I still don't trust the situation. But if Kanehari and my father have robbed me of my baby, I would at least be in some kind of pain. Almost unconsciously I check my breasts. Dr Kanehari's glasses veer sideways. I sense an air of disgust. Maybe it's also my imagination. The tension he's radiating is tight as a drum. He's probably scared he might get into trouble. I sneak a peek at the bed. No trace of blood. It looks exactly the same as the bed I fell asleep in after the injection.

“What time is it?”

“Ten o'clock.”

“Have I been asleep for nine hours unbroken?”

Kanehari snorts. “Some people have a stronger reaction to sleep medication than others. It's nothing unusual. Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“Thirsty, yes, but not hungry.”

“You're clearly sensitive to the anaesthetic. We followed the correct procedure. There were no mistakes.” The doctor's gaze drifts in the direction of the door.

I can't think straight. It dawns on me that I don't want to go back to the Islamic Centre, but I'm also scared of being outside during the hours of daylight. I grab my bag. Kanehari shows me the bathroom. I wash and dress. I leave the chuddar in my bag at the ready, but don't put it on. When I leave the bathroom, the doctor is waiting for me, his hands pressed stiffly into his jacket pockets. I pay him the agreed fee and say nothing. He leads me to the door.

I take out my veil. I notice him look at it. I skilfully wrap the chuddar around my head. I've become something of an expert.

It comes to me at the door.

“Why didn’t I see a nurse?” I say. “You said “we” a moment ago. Didn’t you say you intended to supervise the birth on your own, for the sake of discretion?”

Kanehari remains tight-lipped. I can see myself in his glasses: a tall, veiled figure who fills him with fear, disgust and greed.

## 5

*Hiroshima – metropolitan police headquarters – inspector Takeda  
and chief commissioner Takamatsu – March 10 1995*

As *Orandajin* – half Dutch – Takeda is more apprehensive of the strict hierarchy in the Japanese police service than his colleagues. After assessing the crime scene he drives immediately to his district’s police station. Chief commissioner Takamatsu receives him in his office. Takeda bows, the chief commissioner nods and motions him to get to the point. Takeda gives a detailed report. As Takeda had expected, the commissioner works himself into a serious fuss. He refers to the corpse as “a barbaric disruption of the harmony reigning in the City of Peace”. Takeda presumes he’ll have refined this slogan before the more important papers get wind of the affair. Takamatsu taps at his desk with a letter opener. He thinks Takeda was too easy on the photographer from “that rag” *Shukan Gendai*. Haul the bastard in and scare him shitless! As if a seasoned photographer working for a gutter tabloid could care less about police threats, especially when he knows they can’t follow them through. But Takeda bites his lip, nods and says in a composed manner that the commissioner’s order will be followed and that he’ll be sure to be less cautious with the press in the future. “Now of all times, Takeda!” Takamatsu declaims, his head hung. “The city will be crawling with foreigners soon for the fiftieth anniversary of the atom bomb! I demand an efficient and

professional investigation and I demand results, fast! Don't let this sordid affair cast a slur on your record of service, Takeda!" In the corner of Takamatsu office, the lacquered sheath of an officer's sword from the Second World War graces the wall, hung there by the commissioner himself. Older officers claim he wields the blade with skill and speed to chop *yuzu* to flavour his soup. Takamatsu's office does indeed smell of Japanese citrus all the time, but Takeda is pretty sure the story about the *yuzu* was made up. It's typical of the jokes they tell when they get drunk after work and there are no inspectors around, Takeda excluded. Takeda's half foreigner. That's why the inspector does not consider himself their superior, in spite of his rank.

The commissioner ends the conversation with a tirade over "serious irregularities" in the social order brought about by the *shinjinrui* and their antics, the young people set adrift by the economic crisis who have nothing to do but loaf around and commit crimes. What this has to do with the baby is a mystery to Takeda, but he nods benignly nevertheless. Takeda knows that Takamatsu is dreaming about a career in local politics. He asks himself if the chief commissioner will then be at the beck and call of powerful extreme right organisations that still have a lot of influence in Hiroshima – and in Tokyo and Osaka – and even have close links with the force.

"You can go, Takeda," the chief commissioner barks. 'Don't disappoint me!'

Takeda bows, noticing his hands dangling at his sides in the process.

Huge hands. Murderer's hands according to his wife.

## 6

*Hiroshima – Mitsuko searching the city for a place to sleep –*

*March 11 1995*

I remember precious little of the hours after I left Dr Kanehari's clinic. I ended up in Hiroshima's neon neighbourhood. I don't know the city, so I'm not sure what the district is really called. I was surrounded by shopping centres full of people of my own age, hanging around, the girls in colourful and often outrageous ensembles. Since my arrival on the mainland I've noticed that my knowledge of society is more limited than I had imagined. Theoretical knowledge is misleading. It's experience that shapes us.

It'll be dark in a few hours. I don't know where to go. Fortunately, I took all my money and personal possessions with me when I left the Dambara Centre for my appointment with Dr Kanehari because I couldn't find a reliable place to hide them. But I left my clothes behind.

I decide to grab a hamburger in a place full of blaring music and garish colours. My father always insisted on eating traditional Japanese food. I loosen my chuddar from underneath as Michio taught me. People are looking at me but I lower my eyes and peer at my surroundings through my lashes. The hamburger tastes like soggy cardboard, the Cola leaves me down in the dumps. If my father was right about the food that many Japanese prefer to their traditional cuisine, wasn't there a chance that he had been right when he said that the country needed a new leader? I look around and see smiling faces. I didn't hear laughter like that on Hashima. Everyone in the hamburger joint seems self-assured, high-spirited, carefree.

And the racket! Chitter-chatter right and left like tiny mountain streams coming from God knows where, wriggling and criss-crossing one another. My ears are ready to burst. I feel dizzy. I miss having the sea in the background, the cawing of the seagulls. But the relentless vitality of all these people surrounding me, running on escalators, storming in and out, roller-skating on the sidewalks, unleashes a longing within me. I don't want to go back to Hashima. I want to be like them: wear bright colours, shave my legs, go dancing in discos.

## 7

*Hiroshima – Dai-Ichi-Kangyo Bank –  
March 11 1995*

The bus stops at 8pm in front of the headquarters of the Dai-Ichi-Kangyo Bank. The bus is marked Municipal Cleansing Department. The building is impressive, perfectly apt for an important branch of the biggest bank in Japan. Hiroshima's harbour activities bring in a lot of money. There's a meeting underway with the CEO of the Dai-Ichi-Kangyo Bank who's here from Tokyo. There are two security guards in the lobby. They allow three men into the building with containers on their backs. They're wearing white facemasks and white gloves, the prescribed clothing for this sort of work. The bank's logbook contains the words: destruction of vermin. Once inside the lobby the men pull out pistols with silencers. They shoot the security guards. They put on gas masks and march through the corridors as they open the valves on the containers on their backs.

## 8

*Hiroshima – Mitsuko spends the night in Hotel Ikawa Ryokan –  
Dobashi-Cho – March 11 1995*

Night falls, but I don't go dancing in a disco. I walk into the nearest hotel and book a room. I can't sleep, but I'm not surprised. I toss and turn in the tiny bed. I miss the familiar curves of my belly and feel like a ghost lost in the wrong body. I wasn't raised with other people, I was raised with shadows, and dreams like a puff of breath in the neck when you're alone. A girl can create her own world in such circumstances, a world *in which everything has meaning*. On Hashima, books and rubble were the focal point around which my existence seemed to turn. Rubble was everywhere. The island was

one massive industrial ruin. My father took care of the books. They were delivered in bulk. When it came to books my father set no limits. As a girl, I liked to wander down to the shingle beach and read at the foot of the wall surrounding the island. If you looked up from the beach, the blackened buildings on the island seemed to be on the verge of falling over. People called the island *Gunkan* or ‘the battleship’, because of its shape. It was a place that left you short of breath on account of the secrecy it exuded. The entire island was built over and there were few if any open spaces. My father only allowed me to go to the shore when the weather was good. Each time I was laden like a mule with books. I was crazy about them because they could make the world big or small to taste, interfere in the fate of nations, but also seek out your hidden thoughts, illusive, intangible, like silver-coloured fishes at the bottom of a deep lake.

When the weather was bad I would sit in the old cinema. A good many of the wooden chairs were broken. The screen was torn. I sometimes pictured the characters in the book I was reading coming to life on the screen, making each other’s lives a misery, fighting each other, loving each other. Those were lonely moments, a little creepy too, as if my head was capable of containing much more than I wanted it to. Everything was covered in dust. From time to time the uncontrollable wind would toss it into the air and it would form itself into a figure in my mind’s eye. Then I would quickly look back at the page in front of me. Books protected me from reality. I remember them as a choir of pale shapes, sometimes hysterical, other times comforting, vividly prophetic, or disquieting, like a piano being played in the dark. I’ve always been convinced that stories influence the mind: they haunt regions of the brain where reason has lost its way. Stories made people see my father as Rokurobei, a demon of classic mythology. His background and the way he had been treated will also have had a role to play, but the main reason he acquired the status had its roots in the old stories and their superstitions. When I was a teenager, I was also convinced he wasn’t completely human. My father was treated like

a god by his followers and he considered it nothing out of the ordinary.

Memory is a monstrous thing: I can remember various moments in my youth when I witnessed his supernatural powers at work. It was only after I read the reports of his personal physician that I realised the truth, or should have realised the truth. I'm twenty-one, and even now I still catch myself doubting.

I spend the entire night struggling to settle scores with my past. The lonely existence that I shared with my father seems to have more control over me now than ever before. I realise that this very characteristic, so difficult to put into words, is what makes my father so intangible: he's like a creature you encounter in a dream, yet at the same time he's pure reality.

I fret over what to do next. The old power networks my father exploits might only operate undercover, but they're still to be feared. Rokurobei will deploy every soldier in his shadow army to find me. I talk to him in my imagination and beg him to leave me alone. He remains unmoved, like an old pagan temple. My thoughts return unwilling to the baby that had filled my belly. I'm no longer sure it was real.

But I still felt it.

I talked to it.

I shared my pain and my shame.

The creature was tiny and kind. It understood. It forgave.

It was a universe of comfort.

Dr Kanehari insisted that it had never existed. His glasses flickered an unambiguous message, but I was unable to decipher it.

## 9

### *Hiroshima – Dai-Ichi-Kangyo Bank – night, March 11/12 1995*

The night security team arrives at the Dai-Ichi-Kangyo bank at 11pm. The security officers are taken aback by the thick mist in the

lobby. First they find their two dead colleagues, then some members of the evening shift lying in their own excrement, surrounded by vomit. Their tongues are swollen, their faces contorted, the pupils in their dead eyes barely visible. They call the police. Moments later they're overcome by violent spasms and nausea. By the time the first police officers arrive, the night security team are writhing on the floor, gasping for breath, spitting out chunks of undigested food. Appalled by what they see, the police pay little attention to the abnormal humidity. The security cameras have been destroyed. There are no recordings. The police officers feel unwell. They too are overcome by cramps. Within six minutes the cramps make way for uncontrollable bouts of vomiting. Eyes bulge, collapsing lungs heave in an effort to supply bodies with oxygen. One of the officers manages to warn his colleagues over the walkie-talkie. A huge police presence assembles in front of the bank. The neighbourhood is shut down. It's almost morning when a special team in protective clothing from the national security police discover what caused the poisoning: acetone cyanohydrin mixed with water and sprayed into the air using atomizers. On contact with water, acetone cyanohydrin separates into highly inflammable acetone and highly toxic hydrogen cyanide. The security police find the containers with the water valves. They discover the corpses of the assembled bankers in the meeting room. Here too the security cameras have been destroyed. After a provisional investigation, the members of the elite unit announce that the bank's safes have not been tampered with. Only a detailed investigation can confirm their report, however, since rumours abound that the Dai-Ichi-Kangyo Bank is involved in all sorts of shady financial dealings. The local police insist on leading the investigation, but the National Guard disagree. Friction ensues. Inspector Takeda is assigned to a special group under the leadership of chief inspector Hirasawa.

The inspector calls his wife. It's going to be late. She takes his message with the politeness of a civil servant at an office window.

Takeda fiddles with a toothpick in his mouth. He thinks about the past. He thinks about the present. He thinks about everything at once.

He focuses: the dead baby under the peace monument is still preying on his mind. Why?