

Miss Tsushima

"Hong Kong is devoid of natural resources. Nearly all our food is imported, not to mention much of our water. We are absolutely dependent on trade. Therefore open markets are vital to us, whereas quotas, tariffs, countervailing duties and other restrictions threaten our livelihood. We ourselves impose duty on only five commodities, purely for revenue. Otherwise we are a free port. We have no exchange control. We do not subsidise our industries or protect them in any way. We believe firmly in free and open markets."

Yung, the chief trade negotiator of the Hong Kong government, paused to allow Miss Tsushima to convert his remarks into Japanese. Miss Tsushima was the young liaison officer cum interpreter assigned by the powerful Ministry of International Trade and Industry, or MITI for short, to facilitate his trade promotion visit.

The sight of Miss Tsushima reminded Yung of his daughter, whom he had last seen as a little girl. He wondered whether she was pursuing a career or had settled for marriage. She must be as old as Miss Tsushima by now, he thought, and hoped she had not been brushed by the same air of incongruity attending his young liaison officer.

As Miss Tsushima interpreted in a falsetto voice, Yung tried to identify why she was so disconcerting on the eye. She was not ugly nor were her mannerisms unrefined. It was just that certain elements about her did not mesh. Her pricey Western suit, for example, was too sombre and conservative for her age, while her hair style was altogether too practical and wanting in imagination.

Moreover, her long, pallid face was without make-up, causing it to appear unnecessarily childlike and fresh-scrubbed. It was dominated by eyebrows like two vigorous brushstrokes left by a temperamental calligrapher. Those preposterous growths hovered over eyes that were narrow, somnolent and fringed with short, straight lashes. Yet the irises hinted at a certain dreamy soulfulness.

The inadequacies around the eyes, however, were compensated by a dignified nose and a mouth that was sensual and well formed. The lips were soft, succulent and given to fetching smiles. The mouth was indeed her best feature and, if it had not been for the distraction of the eyebrows, its suitability for deep-drawn kisses in the moonlight would have been more noticeable.

The promises of the mouth were contradicted by a formal deportment, however. There was something controlled and quintessentially Japanese about it, as if she were perpetually on the verge of a bow. A hand would rise automatically to screen the mouth wherever she stumbled over a word or an idea. Her voice, now

floating out like the chirping of a bird, seemed quite unsuited for expounding the hoary principles of free trade.

When Miss Tsushima smiled to signal the completion of the interpretation, Yung resumed his address. "Japan has been a major beneficiary of our open trading policy," he said in his deep, measured voice. "A quarter of our imports come from Japan but only three per cent of our exports reach your market. In money terms, we are importing ten times more from Japan than we are exporting.

"As advocates of multilateral trade, we are not excessively worried when the balance with a particular partner runs into deficit. But when our products remain absent from Tokyo stores, though they find ready acceptance along New York's Fifth Avenue and in London's most prestigious outlets, we must consider the possibility of structural impediments."

As Miss Tsushima began interpreting again, Yung turned his attention to the audience rounded up by MITI and the local chamber of commerce for his address. They seemed all of a kind -- proud, middle-aged, correct and buttoned up. He had encountered their kind all over the world, as members of business missions or as delegates to the dreary talking shops spawned by GATT and UNCTAD.

How they baffled him! How they hid their desires beneath pleasantries and rituals! Everything about them, from their guttural grunts and startling intakes of breath to their shut and unrevealing faces, seemed designed to put foreigners off stride. If only they pursued their objectives with the hectoring arrogance of Americans or the polished deviousness of Europeans he would know how to handle them. But their very politeness left him stuck for suitable responses.

Over the years he had watched them conjure out of the ashes of defeat the industrial juggernaut now flooding the world with motor vehicles, machinery, petrochemicals, television sets and electronic gadgetries. He had looked on as they decimated Western industries, enhanced market shares and devoured competitors like silkworms munching through mulberry leaves. They had all but established the "co-prosperity sphere" in the Far East they had once sought through force of arms. What was next on their agenda? Were there limits to their ambition?

And where did Miss Tsushima fit in the new national design? During the week she had attended to his programme, he had found her deferential manners and her quaint textbook English unsettling. Was she merely a subtler image of the traditional enemy?

From his earliest childhood his mother had trained him to hate all Japanese. She had held them responsible for stealing China's lands, sacking its cities, raping its women and slaughtering its children. They were barbarians, she had asserted, with no atrocity too horrific to commit. Among their victims had been his

own father, tortured and beheaded for nothing more heinous than smuggling some medicine into an internment camp for a sick friend.

The execution had been carried out by the *kempeitai*, the military police of the occupation. He had no memory of the tragedy because he had been only a few months old when it happened. But over the years his mother had spared him none of its gory details. She would describe in a choked voice, again and again, his father's kneeling figure, the barbaric yell of the executioner, the swish of the *samurai* sword, the head bouncing along the ground, the spurt of blood from the severed neck and her own protracted collapse thereafter.

As a boy he had often spent restless nights trying to understand the meaning of his father's death. How could the giving of medicine to a sick friend invite a punishment so out of keeping with civilised conduct? If a person had to die for an act of kindness, was it better not to be kind or not to have friends? If one could not assist friends, then what was the point of friendship? On the other hand, what compelling considerations guided the actions of the Japanese?

His mind grappled endlessly with such questions, leading him deeper and deeper into a maze of his own creation. His mother could not show him the way to escape. She could only point in the direction of implacable hatred. That seemed to him both impractical and contrary to his own instincts. He could no more hate a nation he did not know than love a father he could not remember.

As he grew into adolescence his bewilderment led him to study the Japanese. He wanted to understand them and reach his own conclusions. He therefore began by acquainting himself with the tormented souls in Japanese literature. But he found that, apart from a greater propensity to seek resolutions in death, they behaved little differently from anybody else when smitten by love or shame or other strong emotion.

He then delved into the mythology of Shinto, with its purification rites and its confusion of superior beings, and that led inevitably to the unwritten code of *bushido* and the uncompromising spirit of Yamato. The other-worldliness of Zen followed. Its essence as elusive as water to the grasp and yet all-pervading, colouring everyday ceremonies, influencing the arrangement of gardens and, more often than not, haunting the lines of many a *haiku*.

Still he could not reconcile such qualities of heart and soul with the shameless treacheries and convulsive cruelties of that puzzling race. Nor could he divine how they had attained a thriving economy with a conformist mentality. The more he studied them, the more baffled he became.

The dour men now before him seemed utter enigmas. They might be the shock troopers of their nation's economic conquests or the corporate architects of its cozy cartels. But whatever they were, they had to be won over if he were ever to

convince their politicians and their Kasumigaseki mandarins of the need for more open market policies.

But he was making no impression. It had been the same all week. He felt annoyed by the futility of his mission, particularly when trade promotion was not even his direct responsibility. He had allowed himself to be talked into it because he had planned a vacation in Japan. He was glad the present talk would be his last. He was more than ready for his holiday.

When the signal came again to resume speaking, Yung smiled affably. Nothing in his alert brown eyes or his intelligent face betrayed his disappointment, for he was a consummate actor. He had to be, to succeed in the deadly poker game of trade negotiations. He continued manfully with his speech, stressing the importance of comparative advantage, the damaging effects of trade restrictions, the dangers of currency instabilities and the opportunities in the Colony for inward investments.

The applause that greeted the end of his speech was so polite as to be derisory. He swallowed his pride, however, and set about thanking the organisers of the event.

At last, when only Miss Tsushima remained, Yung said: "I must thank you for all your arrangements and for suffering so many dull speeches. If you are free this evening, may I invite you to dinner to show my gratitude?"

"Thank you, Yung-san. You are most kind," Miss Tsushima replied, acknowledging the invitation with a half-bow and a winning smile. "Your speeches were most interesting. I learnt a great deal. But I'm sorry about dinner. I have a report on your visit to finish. Otherwise I cannot go on leave tomorrow."

"Ah, the inescapable report! Armies may march on their stomachs but civil servants have to feed on reports. I hope yours will not be too unkind. Where are you taking your leave?"

"I'm going home to Kyoto, to visit my father."

"What a coincidence! I'm spending a few days in Kyoto myself, before heading for Hokkaido."

"Yes, I know. I confirmed your hotel bookings. Remember?" Miss Tsushima's luscious lips formed themselves chidingly around that final word.

"Of course! How absent-minded of me! Well, should I need a guide in Kyoto, I'll know who to contact."

"It would be an honour, Yung-san, to show you my home town. It is a great cultural centre. That is why the Americans did not bomb it during the war."

As Yung heard the gush of guide book enthusiasms that followed, about Kyoto's history and folklore, its temples and shrines, its gardens and handicrafts, he knew his attempt at conversation had misfired. He had wanted to wander the city on

his own, to drink in its atmosphere and, perchance, to discover something of the soul of its people. The last thing he wanted was the surveillance of a MITI functionary.

It was not that he had anything specific against Miss Tsushima. She had attended to him with courtesy and efficiency. But it was one thing to arrange venues for speeches and draw up seating plans and quite another to probe into the psyche of a nation. She would just get in the way.

"If you'll give me your telephone number, I'll call should I need help," Yung said, trying to extricate himself.

But Miss Tsushima forestalled him by saying: "It will be easier for me to call, Yung-*san*, since I already have your hotel number. People at my home do not speak English."

That evening, dining alone, Yung tried to devise a means of escape. But every excuse he could think of risked misunderstanding and embarrassment.

Since the break-up of his marriage he had shied away from feminine entanglements. He was fearful of fresh relationships turning out as disastrously as his marriage. The helpless pain he had felt when his ex-wife spirited their daughter away still rankled with him. Besides, his duties were increasingly onerous. He hardly had time to attend to his unstable mother, let alone another family. Admittedly, he occasionally suffered loneliness, but he found solace in his work. His frequent travels also enabled him to ease the random stirrings of the flesh with artful professionals.

But wandering around a strange city with someone like Miss Tsushima would be an entirely different proposition. He was not sure he could sustain a serious conversation with someone so young. Apart from the generation separating them, there were also the gulfs in status and experience. But there seemed no way out. He slept badly that night, as he sometimes did before the start of difficult negotiations.

Miss Tsushima duly rang after his arrival in Kyoto and Yung surrendered himself to her care. When she presented herself, however, he almost failed to recognise her. A touch of rouge and lipstick, a visit to the hairdresser and the exchange of the dark business suit for a bright spring dress had quite transformed her. The thick eyebrows had lost their dominance and it was her cheerful face as a whole that attracted attention. The intrepid dog's-body had turned into a lively girl in the first bloom of youth.

The altered appearance increased Yung's self-consciousness initially. But he relaxed once Miss Tsushima had demonstrated her competence as a guide.

Yung was quickly captivated by the magic of Kyoto. He realized at once why it used to be called the Capital of Peace. The city had about it the grace and timelessness of an ancient place, a certain ease and settled maturity. Because it had been virtually undamaged by the war, it was devoid of those modern edifices of steel

and concrete blighting many reconstructed towns. Wherever he went, be it to a traditional tea house, down the aptly named Path of Philosophy or among the ceramics stalls in Teapot Lane, he felt in touch with something tranquil and Eastern and seemingly eternal. He found it impossible to believe that a people, vouchsafed as utterly vile by his mother, could have created so civilised a place. The end of the day saw him relaxed and contented and even enjoying the company of his guide.

The next morning began with a journey to the famous Kiyomizu Temple, perched precariously on the edge of a precipice. In discussing the religions of Japan, Yung discovered Miss Tsushima was from a Shinto family. She had studied English at the International Christian University in Tokyo because her mother had wanted her to know about Western concepts and be modern.

A visit to Maruyama Park to view cherry blossoms followed in the afternoon. A gentle spring breeze was rustling through the park, teasing the blossom-laden branches into a shy, undulating dance. The white blooms, with traces of pink at their centres, delighted him with their beauty.

"Today is most suitable for viewing cherry blossoms in Kyoto," Miss Tsushima explained. "That's why many visitors are here. The blossoms normally bloom for a week to ten days. But if heavy rain comes, they perish right away. They flower slightly later as you go north, so it is possible for you to enjoy them all the way to Hokkaido."

"That would be marvellous," Yung said. "What a pity they last for so short a while."

"Is that not the law of nature, Yung-san? Petals must fall sooner or later from even the most beautiful of blooms. Is it not the very transitoriness of things that makes life precious?"

The wistful note in Miss Tsushima's remarks was so unexpected it caused Yung to cast her a quick, sideways glance. In so doing he caught a slight knitting of the dark brows and a strange melancholy in the eyes. It appeared so obviously a private sadness that he looked away at once, embarrassed, like an intruder caught in an underhanded act.

They walked in silence for a while, each absorbed with private speculations. They did not notice the skies darkening. Before long large dollops of rain fell and people started scurrying for shelter.

"We had better find shelter," Yung said. "It looks ominous."

"Go down that path, Yung-san," Miss Tsushima said, pointing. "There's shelter at the end of it. I want to admire the cherry blossoms a while longer."

"In the rain?"

"It's my only chance to enjoy them this year. They are going to be destroyed. I have to bid them farewell."

Yung thought it idiotic to get soaked for the sake of watching blossoms being destroyed by rain. But at the same time it appeared ungallant to seek shelter while Miss Tsushima remained. So he stayed also, his curiosity aroused, sheltering as best he could under a tree.

The spring rains came with a sudden vehemence. They lashed at the white clusters, slowly disintegrating them. Their petals fell as if with a sigh, like so many white, wounded butterflies. Yung watched Miss Tsushima reacting to the sight with trembling lips and an expression of infinite sadness. He, too, felt as if he was witnessing a sacrilege he was powerless to prevent. Before long, all that remained of the glorious blooms were the sorry remnants scattered around the base of each tree.

By then they had both become quite soaked. Miss Tsushima's hair hung down in dripping strands and she began to shiver and sneeze.

"We had better get out of these wet clothes if we're not to catch pneumonia," Yung said, feeling the chill himself. "Let's head for my hotel. It's nearby."

Miss Tsushima nodded and Yung gained the impression the wetness on her face was not due entirely to rain.

At the hotel Yung handed Miss Tsushima a set of his own pyjamas and the hotel's complimentary dressing gown. "I suggest you take a hot bath while I order tea," he said. "Pass out your dress and I'll get it cleaned and pressed."

Miss Tsushima obeyed. Yung heard the water running in the bathroom and he took the opportunity to change into dry clothes as well. But it was a long time before Miss Tsushima emerged. By then the tea had already arrived.

When Miss Tsushima stumbled out of the bathroom, she presented a comic sight. Her hair was a wet, ruffled mess and the borrowed clothes were naturally far too large. As she stood uncertainly, barefooted and slightly pigeon-toed, she looked more like a mischievous gamin than a minor representative of Japanese officialdom.

When she caught sight of her own reflection in the room mirror, she let out a shriek. "Oh, I look terrible!" she wailed, covering her mouth with a hand. "I am sorry, Yung-san, to get you wet. It is unforgivable to allow an official guest to get drenched. I got carried away. I'm really sorry."

"You can be sure I shall complain to your government!" Yung replied, and they both laughed.

The steaming cups of green tea refreshed them and after a few pleasantries Yung asked about Miss Tsushima's family.

"My family has been in the textile business for generations. But it does not appeal to me. I am an only child because my father married very late. My

mother died when I was fourteen. That presents a problem. Unless my father adopts someone to carry on the family name, our line will be finished. So will the business."

Yung noticed Miss Tsushima's eyes clouding over again so he quickly turned the conversation around. "I'm also an only child," he said, light-heartedly. "My family line will definitely end with me. That is not too important in Hong Kong nowadays. We have become quite Westernised."

"But do you not intend to marry and have children?"

"I was married once but it did not work. I also have a daughter. But I haven't seen or heard from her in more than eighteen years. My ex-wife took her to America without letting me know. I don't know where they are now and I doubt if I shall ever see my daughter again."

"I'm sorry. I'm sure you will be reunited with her one day. You can always marry again and start another family."

"No, I'm too old for that. Besides, the world is not a friendly place for children."

Miss Tsushima pondered that statement for a moment. Then she asked: "Are your parents still with you?"

"My mother lives with me. She is naturally quite old and not altogether well. My father was killed during the war."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Was he a soldier?"

"No, he was a pharmacist. I never really knew him. He was executed during the Japanese occupation, when I was just a baby. He was caught smuggling some medicine into an internment camp for a sick friend."

Upon hearing that Miss Tsushima jumped to her feet and bowed deeply. "Please forgive us, please forgive us," she said.

Yung rose to his feet also, surprised and embarrassed. "There is nothing to forgive," he said. "It has nothing to do with you. It happened a long time ago, before you were even born."

Nonetheless Miss Tsushima remained in her reverential position. "Someone has to accept moral responsibility for the war and for its suffering," she said. "There are still many in Japan who deny responsibility. But if those inheriting the past do not accept what has happened, who will? Is it not up to the young to see that it can never happen again?"

The questions -- and the spirit in which they had been asked -- compounded Yung's surprise. At the same time they dislodged memories long imbedded in the sediments of his past. How long had it been since he harboured such brave sentiments? When did he last demand a moral purpose to life or wrestle with the inner meaning of existence? It slowly dawned on him it had been too long. It

went back to his entrance into government service, when he still entertained notions of creating a society fit for his then unborn daughter.

The intervening years had seen the annihilation of his hopes, the defeat of his dreams. He had discovered the cynicism of the powerful and the hardness of heart of the supposedly educated. It was not really the pen-pushers in governments who ran the world but the corporate buccaneers, money-launderers, oil barons, arms manufacturers, hot money wizards and a host of shadowy syndicates and cartels. Government officials were merely glorified messengers pushing the agenda of others.

He had therefore concluded that concern for the human condition invited unnecessary pain; striving after ideals was a waste of time. It was better to mind one's own business, to find a safe corner for making a decent living. In his case he had selected the beggar-thy-neighbour calling of trade negotiations, spending the years honing skills in pedantic arguments about certification, categorisation, swings, carry-overs or market disruptions.

On a sudden, with a catch in his heart, it occurred to him his ex-wife might have detected his slide into cynicism and so took their daughter away in disgust!

Yung looked at Miss Tsushima rigidly maintaining her bow. For a fleeting moment he hated her. He hated her guileless smiles and her gratuitous apologies. Most of all he hated her moral tone. But once that flare of rage had passed, he realised the person he should really hate was himself.

He looked across at Miss Tsushima again, so small and contrite, like someone awaiting punishment, and his heart went out to her. He wanted to console her. So he reached over and lifted her from her bowing posture. But all he managed to say as he clasped her to his bosom was: "It's all right. It's all right."

They stood hugging each other for a long moment. Miss Tsushima's body felt soft and warm in his embrace and her hair smelt damp and fresh, like his daughter's had been after a shower.

A confusion of memories washed over him and suddenly the floodgates holding back the sterility and loneliness of life burst and swamped him with despair. He looked back over the solitary decades bereft of father, of wife, of daughter. He reflected upon the barrenness of an existence with a mother crushed beneath a burden of bitterness. All he had really got out of his chosen career had been the superficial glamour of being on a diplomatic merry-go-round and some brittle homage from the fat cats whom his efforts had enriched. He felt suddenly overwhelmed by a desire to turn back the clock, to redeem his life, and for one demented moment the girl in his arms seemed like an instrument for salvation.

He drew away swiftly upon that thought, shamed by such utter nonsense. But as he did so Miss Tsushima turned her face towards him. Her dark eyes seemed

misty with husbanded sadness and her luscious lips were slightly parted, tremulous and inviting, like a gillyflower about to unfold. On an impulse he kissed her. To his surprise she responded. When she did not resist his further explorations beneath the dressing gown he carried her off to bed.

"*Itai, itai*," Miss Tsushima moaned, as he gave rein to his desire. That foreign and incomprehensible word sounded strangely exciting. It came first in low gasps and then more shrilly, before falling off into prolonged moans. He took it to be an indication of pleasure, or of release, and each cry spurred him into greater ardour.

In the afterglow of love, as Miss Tsushima dozed beside him, he allowed his mind to fantasise. It was not too late for happiness, he told himself. The girl next to him had already helped him rediscover aspects of himself. She might yet shed light on the nature of her people. Speculating thus, he slipped into notions of seeing Hokkaido in her company and even of inviting her to Hong Kong.

When Miss Tsushima stirred and opened her eyes, he smiled affectionately and asked: "What does '*itai*' mean?"

Miss Tsushima responded by burying her face in his shoulder. Her demurral seemed both charming and provocative, so he kept coaxing her, mimicking her cries, until she finally whispered: "It means painful."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Yung cried. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I had no idea. Have you not done it before?"

Miss Tsushima shook her head and Yung felt the moisture of tears upon his chest. The denial filled him with both joy and confusion. It was not in the nature of respectable girls in the Orient -- at least not those of his generation -- to sacrifice their virginity lightly. So making love had to mean something. But what? Could she have found something attractive in him? Was a longer-term relationship possible? If so, it was a chance not to be missed. So thinking, he asked: "Would you care to go to Hokkaido with me? I could do with an interpreter."

"I'm sorry," Miss Tsushima said, "but we should not meet again. I'm getting married in two weeks."

Yung's confusion turned swiftly into alarm. He thought immediately of the honey traps of espionage, of compromising photographs and the blackmail to come. But he dismissed such notions as quickly as they had arisen. He could not believe Miss Tsushima capable of stooping so low.

"I don't understand," he said, confounded. "If you're getting married, why get involved with me?"

"To repay a debt, to atone."

"A debt? What debt? To atone for what?"

Miss Tsushima sat up in the bed, unashamed in her nakedness. Her downcast eyes were bright with tears. "To atone for my father, for a debt he incurred a long time ago," she said, in a voice carrying a new timbre.

After pausing as if to gather strength, she said: "You see, my father served with the Imperial Army in China when he was a young man. But in 1939, after two years of service, he was repatriated and discharged as mentally unbalanced. My grandparents thought it must have been caused by the trauma of war but my father refused to say anything.

"He displayed strange tendencies. He took no interest in the family business or in getting married. He stayed inside his room, which he kept lit day and night, and hardly spoke to anyone. He ate and slept irregularly and raged at anyone intruding upon him during his dark moods. Yet he refused all medical help. My grandparents were at their wit's end. When my grandfather died, that had an effect on him and my grandmother managed to get him to marry my mother, a girl orphaned by the war.

"Although my mother was many years his junior, she managed to relate to him. The reason for his condition slowly emerged. It seemed he was being tormented by things he had done in China. The worst deeds occurred during the winter of 1937. His division had been ordered to take an important city but the defenders fought fiercely and many of his closest comrades got killed.

"After the capture of the city, his commanders were furious over their losses. They wanted to teach the inhabitants a lesson and to show other Chinese cities the penalty for resistance. So they allowed the troops to do whatever they wished. For six weeks all discipline was abandoned. It was as if the whole world had gone mad. The soldiers sacked and looted, raped and killed, until the stench of death became unbearable."

Something about Miss Tsushima's narrative reminded Yung of his mother's accounts of Japanese brutalities. It conveyed the same quality of painful memorisation. So he interrupted her and asked: "What was the name of the city?"

"Nanking."

"The Rape of Nanking! My mother told me about it. A quarter of a million civilians were slaughtered!"

"Yes, it was a terrible atrocity," Miss Tsushima said, in a voice breaking with emotion. "We have to accept moral responsibility so as to purge our collective guilt, to stop such things happening again."

After another pause, she continued: "Once his madness had passed, my father felt he had lived through hell. He could not understand how he could have turned into such a beast. It was as if all his education had counted for nothing. He had behaved no better than the most ignorant peasant conscript. The murders and

rapes he had committed gnawed at his conscience. He suffered nightmares in which those he had harmed closed in on him, screaming for revenge.

"After the war, a War Crimes Tribunal was held over the Nanking massacres but my father was left out because everybody had forgotten about him. Nonetheless, he felt he ought to be punished, both for what he had done and for bringing dishonour to his family and his nation. He was convinced the seeds of evil were inside him and he wanted to destroy them by killing himself.

"Only the vigilance of my mother prevented him from succeeding. She tricked him into having me, in the hope that a child would give him something to live for. But it did not work. His morbid moods remained. When my mother came across Christian teachings about forgiveness, atonement and salvation, she tried to give him hope. But he thought himself beyond redemption.

"Unfortunately, my mother's health was poor. She told me about my father on her deathbed and begged me to prevent him hurting himself. It was not too difficult at first. I expressed my fear of being left with no one to look after me and in that way I gained a few years.

"But during my final year at university I could tell he was returning to the idea of suicide. In order to gain more time, I urged him to find me a husband, though I did not really want to get married. That stayed his hand a while longer. Now he has finalised arrangements for my wedding. Once it is over I fear he will kill himself. I've tried to talk him into adopting a son to carry on the family name but he said it was better for our name to be wiped out forever.

"I felt completely helpless. I did not know what else to do. Then, when you told me about your father being executed by the *kempeitai* and showed no grudge, an idea came to me. I thought if I atoned to you for my father's crimes, by offering you what is most precious to me and what can only be offered once, the gods might take pity and grant my father peace. It was a silly idea, I now realise, but I meant no harm, *Yung-san*. All I wanted was to ease my father's suffering."

Two tears, eloquent with desperation, rolled down Miss Tsushima's cheeks. Yung was covered with confusion. He reached out and gave one of Miss Tsushima's hands a gentle squeeze. "It's all right, it's all right," he said.

All the while, as he listened to that story, he had been assailed by mixed emotions. He felt foolish over misinterpreting Miss Tsushima's behaviour. But at the same time he felt pity for the torment of an old man he had never met, a torment cruelly extended by both a wife's well-intentioned compassion and a daughter's filial piety. He wished he could bring together his mother and the old man so that both might be reconciled through their respective sufferings.

He experienced astonishment, too, that the Miss Tsushima's ready smiles concealed so much inner turmoil. He felt strangely moved. He reflected upon each

generation's ability to replenish from the womb of creation the capacity for exalted dreams. The ability to dream was at the heart of human existence. Because he had settled for the froth of life, he had forgotten that.

Now it was too late. He had wasted his span for dreams. He wanted to tell Miss Tsushima not to make the same mistake, but he could not find the words. Miss Tsushima's nakedness, too, suddenly became unbearable. So he draped the hotel's dressing gown over her shoulders and said: "Thank you for your most precious gift. I shall treasure it always. I wish your father the peace he seeks."

Miss Tsushima has appeared in **Short Story International** in the United States.