

PROLOGUE

When I was a girl, my father told me the story of two whooping cranes who set out to fly across the world together to fulfill their migratory destinies. Over the middle of the largest ocean, they ran into a terrible storm whose high winds battered and separated them. Blinded and disoriented, they lost their way and flew off again, this time in different directions. One headed west, the other east. Both of them eventually found land, though it was not the same land from which they had departed.

Many years passed. On different continents, the two cranes grew to old age; each was the last of her kind. The space around them, where the wide, comforting wings of a friend had once been, was empty. There was no one to understand what it was like to fly off as one thing in the morning and return as another at night, to grow old without a soul to tell one's memories to.

Then, one day, the crane in the West decided to go looking for the crane in the East. There was not much time left.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the crane in the East decided that she, too, would go in search of her old friend.

The two cranes wisely told no one of their plans and received no opinions. They lived mostly in silence, as it was. The night before they were to depart, they said prayers asking for direction, and made offerings of rice.

They left on their final journeys in the same minute. Both of them flew toward the sun, which they remembered perfectly from long ago. In the West it was dawn, in the East it was dusk.

No one ever saw them land.

PART ONE

1

In the years before the war, my family lived in Shibuya Ward, in a large house with a walled garden. The sake brewing company that my father, Tsuneyasu Endo, had inherited from his father prospered under his guidance, making him a respected figure in the business community. My mother's family was older and more distinguished than my father's, a fact that she neither promoted nor attempted to hide. As for me, born in 1934, the year of the dog, I was an only child and wore the proper skirts that my mother laid out for me each morning. I was fond of tennis, history, and calligraphy. There was, I suppose, nothing remarkable about me as a child, save for my father's love, for it was to me that he always told his favorite stories.

Of the world beyond our garden walls, I had little awareness. I could not yet read the newspapers, and it was only in my teens that I grew to love the radio. Good girls like me, who spent hours each day following prescriptives meant to establish their unimpeachable credentials, were even more inward than they are today. One might say that my childhood insularity was a form of hereditary protection in whose shade, like a pale, delicate mushroom, I grew. The economic depression, omnipresent anxiety, and rising nationalism that had infected our nation and others weren't things I spent time worrying about. The military was aligned under the Emperor, believing him to be a god worth dying and killing for – in his name a coup was staged and, in China, a massacre seen to its bloody end – while in his walled-and-moated palace in the center of our great capital, His Majesty remained augustly silent. On these matters, as on so many others of terrible

importance, I held no opinions that I can recall, and, of course, no one ever asked me to speak my mind.

In the first days of spring, plum blossoms appeared in our garden, perfuming the air, and camellias as red as the *furoshiki* in which we wrapped our holiday gifts. There were birds, I remember: one in particular, small and yellow with gray-and-black wings, used to sit and sing on the stone lantern outside my window.

When war came in earnest from the far side of the world, the first major food staple to be rationed in Tokyo was rice. After that miso and shoyu went on the list, then fish, eggs, tofu, grains of all kinds. Soon everything was rationed, and whatever the size of one's house or the district one happened to be living in, the only way to feed one's family was to enter the black market and see what could be bought there for five or ten times the pre-war price. This was my mother's job, as of course it was for all the women in Tokyo. Men had suddenly become a scarce commodity, if not quite as sought after as rice. It was not uncommon to see a nearly bald soldier on a street corner begging women he didn't know to add to his thousand-stitch belt. Each new stitch, it was believed, would help prevent him from being hit by a bullet.

Monzen Nakacho, in Fukagawa district, was the most reliable source for black-market supplies. My mother and I went there twice a month. The street was always congested with lines of women waiting to buy this or that. They chatted and picked their teeth; some nursed their babies. The surface distinctions of birth, which only a year or two earlier would have been impenetrable, had by then been all but wiped away by the shortages. My mother, for example, had always been an elegant dresser, but with the war it would have been unthinkable to continue wearing formal skirts, or even traditional kimonos. *Monpe*, those wide-legged pants, were what women

wore, and my mother was no exception. And color? There was only one. National-defense color, the color of uniforms.

Along Monzen Nakacho was a bakery famous for its *kasutera*. When the ovens were going at full strength, the entire neighborhood smelled like warm sponge cake. Outside the shop, the line of customers would start forming early and keep growing until day's end. Family reunions took place in that line, and political discussions, and sometimes probably love affairs. To much of these dramas, at my age, I was quite oblivious, absorbed in my dreams of *kasutera*, and of the buttered peanuts and deep-fried green peas that the bakery also sold. I wasn't the only one: the old women around me, too, seemed lost in thoughts of food, not love or politics or war, raising their walking sticks and shuffling forward and planting their sticks in the ground again, all day long, like herons fishing in a river of silt.

Then there came the sad day when the bakery could no longer procure even powdered Shanghai eggs, and there was nothing with which to make the *kasutera* rise or to give it its deliciously soft but airy texture. The sponge cake loaves that everyone coveted were replaced by whale-ham sandwiches. And it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the sound of air-raided sirens, and even the roar of approaching enemy planes, caused but minor distress compared with the fishy, metallic taste of whale ham on the tongue. The smell of freshly baked *kasutera*, which had sustained us as a people, was suddenly gone from Monzen Nakacho, and from that moment forward the street gave off the faint putrid whiff of a marine graveyard. And still the lines outside the bakery did not shrink. So perhaps it wasn't the *kasutera* after all that had held us together in the street, morning after morning, but the solidarity of the line. Perhaps we had come to depend on one another in ways invisible and outside anything we'd imagined or wished for.

I remember a dog in particular, a very foreign and beautiful animal, a borzoi I believe it was. We would be standing in line outside the bakeshop

and sooner or later we'd see him being walked by his owner, the son of a local doctor. The dog was so handsome that seeing him was like seeing a Western movie star, Cary Grant or Montgomery Clift. By comparison, the doctor's son was short and his eyes were set too close together. He was considerably less glamorous than his pet and he seemed to know it, which was rather charming. Everyone who waited in line in Monzen Nakacho was acquainted with the dog and looked forward to catching a glimpse of him.

There was something about him, something other than his well-bred good looks. I remember one day standing in line with my mother and seeing the doctor's son and his beautiful dog walking not ten meters distant, when suddenly, and for no apparent reason, the animal began to howl and moan. The crying was so plaintive it silenced everyone who heard it. It made some of the women standing in line embarrassed, they knew not why, while others became instantly afraid, and others were struck as though by the death of a loved one. Briefly we forgot about the smell of fresh-baked kasutera, and also about the stench of whale ham. We forgot about deprivation, forgot about the war, forgot to grow up or grow older.

It was a few minutes after the dog first started moaning and howling that we heard the deeper, more frightening sound that seemed to emerge from the very earth around us. We ducked and cried out. The air-raid siren was so loud it obliterated the self; it sent us running from where we stood with such terror that our pasts were momentarily left behind.

This was what the dog had sensed minutes before us, and what his howling was meant to alert us to.

And then, one day, we saw the doctor's son walking without his dog. My mother politely asked him where the dog was, and he seemed on the verge of tears. He'd been keeping the dog in a crawl space under the floor of his house, he told her, because of the howling and the moaning. But, cooped up like that, the dog barked continuously day and night. One evening an

officer came by the house and complained about the noise, saying it was disrupting official military communications in the area. He ordered the doctor's son to put an end to the noise or risk punishment. As the officer was leaving, he suggested a type of poison that he knew from experience with his own animals was most efficacious. This was the poison that the doctor's son had given to his dog.

A week later, my family was evacuated to Gunma Prefecture for the remainder of the war. I left my friends in Tokyo and entered a new school. The day we departed, as we were driving away from our large house with its plum blossoms and red camellias, my mother suddenly burst into tears. I stroked her hand and told her not to worry, we would come back. She said it wasn't leaving the house that made her so sad, it was the dog, the memory of that dog in Monzen Nakacho, she couldn't get him out of her mind.

"Don't be silly," my father told her sharply. "We're losing the war. The country's being destroyed. Who cares about a stupid dog?"

It was one of the few times I ever knew him to be cruel.

On the wall of my new classroom was a huge map of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Little rising suns marked those areas where Japan had won great victories, or where momentous battles were then being fought. At the beginning of 1945, when I was ten, another flag went up somewhere near Taiwan. It was the last flag that would ever be pinned to that map, but we didn't know that at the time. Our teacher put it there herself, standing on a chair, after leading the class in singing the national anthem.

The classroom was always freezing, the hard stone floor sending a constant, bone-aching cold up through our thin shoes. Many students suffered from chilblains. All day long we hugged ourselves, sneaking glances out the window at the groups of sixth-grade boys in short-sleeved shirts digging "octopus holes" in the lawn – to dive into if enemy tanks ever

appeared and began firing at us. The rest of the boys were off harvesting grass for the military's horses to eat. We had all seen photographs in the newspaper of His Majesty sitting astride his tall white horse, inspecting the troops. He was a god, and you were not allowed to gaze on him directly or from above, nor could you show disrespect to his image in any way. As some old people still liked to say, "You can gaze upon the lords, but looking at the shogun will make you blind; and the Emperor cannot be seen at all." One of our classmates had recently been punished for having her lunch wrapped in newsprint containing such a photograph.

And then, in the first week of March, the air raids began to come like clockwork, about an hour after sunrise, and the soldiers we passed on the road on the way home from school began looking like unkempt stragglers. And still we continued to practice our piano pieces and run races for the track team. As if those innocent pursuits would be enough to see us from one side of history to the other.

It was later reported by some surviving eyewitnesses of the Tokyo firebombings that at the outset of the incendiary attack on the night of March 9, 1945, with countless American warplanes still droning in the night sky and a cloud of fire already ascendant over the Sumida River, cries of polite admiration were heard from citizens standing in their gardens, watching the spectacle as if it were a holiday fireworks display. A few hours later, the same people would perish in the shelter holes they'd dug in the once-cool earth beneath their small wooden houses – for every family would have loyally obeyed the government's order to defend their home against invasion and attack. The thick padded hoods claimed as correct air-raid clothing by the government, and religiously worn by the trusting populace, turned out, that night, to be highly flammable. Babies bundled in this material and strapped to their mothers' backs were incinerated, often before their mothers even noticed they were on fire. The day following the bombing, the wind

continued to blow, scattering perfectly formed corpses of ash, mothers and babies alike, into unrecognizable shapes, and finally into dust. In all, more than a hundred thousand men, women, and children were burned, boiled, baked, or asphyxiated.

Aerial photographs of Tokyo at that time show, through dense clouds of steam and smoke still rising from the ruins expanding outward from the bay, a blackened, leveled husk of a city, with odd unburned patches – tall stone buildings and stark towers, stubborn edifices, here and there an iron bridge, and, directly center, like an all-seeing eye, the large, walled, moated, still mostly green expanse of the Imperial Palace – His Majesty’s abode, the place from which he looked out upon his people with the care, benevolence, and wisdom that were his sacred duty.

My cousin Yumi lost her father, my uncle. In May, as the rainy season was beginning, my aunt went into Tokyo to search for his body among the hills of corpses that had risen all over the city.

My mother and I were waiting with Yumi on the veranda of their house when my aunt returned. Her wooden sandals had been charred from walking through the hot ashes, and the hems of her trousers were ruined. Thumbprints of soot darkened her cheek and one of her wrists. She stopped and bowed to us, silently asking our forgiveness for her failure to find her husband’s body. She touched her daughter’s hair, and then she entered the house. From the *tokonoma* she took down a pair of ceramic tea bowls made by her husband’s great-grandfather during the time of Emperor Meiji, and these she took with her into the back room and closed the screen behind her.

A year later, I was allowed to accompany my father into Tokyo for the first time since the end of the war. In the intervening months, two atomic bombs had been dropped on our southern cities, killing and maiming generations of

our people, and the Emperor had declared himself human. The War Crimes Tribunals had begun, with our now-human Emperor spared the ignominy of being put on trial and, if convicted, hanged until dead. Our new god, the American general Douglas MacArthur, thought it useful to keep the old god around. The general was so very tall, much taller than our emperor, as everyone soon discovered when the newspapers, at the American's directive, published the famous photograph of the two men meeting for the first time. His Majesty, tiny beside the looming giant from the West, was dressed in morning clothes like a miniature King George, while the general had not even bothered to button the collar of his uniform.

My father and I rode into the city that day in the back of his chauffeur-driven car. He was still a wealthy man. His breweries had been situated outside the five largest cities, and so had been spared the worst of the devastation. This was a fact that he accepted soberly, as a responsibility bestowed on him by fate. He'd taken to carrying scraps of cardboard in his suit pockets, on which he would scribble observations and ideas, perhaps eulogies. During the car ride that day, I watched him pull a piece of cardboard from his pocket, feel in another pocket for a stump of pencil, and make a note to himself. He caught me staring, touched his nose, and gave me a wink, which made me smile. We were entering the outskirts of the city then, and my smile did not last long.

It wasn't the same city I'd known. On plot after plot of land on which houses had once stood, there were little heaps of broken stone and warped metal. Shantytowns of tin and wood shacks had sprung up in burned-out, vine-choked gardens, and everywhere one looked one saw ground-hole dwellings covered with tarpaulins. Women as thin as furled parasols walked slowly, carrying refuse of all kinds on their backs and earthenware jars of water in their arms. It was the rainy season, the air dripping with heat and moisture, the sky dark and the earth darker still with mud and ash. Wooden

sandals sank into the mud. An iron safe stood alone on a cement platform in the middle of oblivion, as if waiting for someone who could crack it. Nearby, there were scattered patches of some growing crop. “Wheat,” my father explained, following my confused gaze as our car went by. It was harvesttime, and people who’d been growing grain wherever they could – in weedy corners of dead gardens and in standing ash heaps and in the splintered spines of ruined sidewalks – were bent over their meager output all across the city, drying, threshing, winnowing. We passed a group of old women squatting by the side of the road, rubbing handfuls of wheat between their hands to make sure that not a gram was lost. They looked like Gypsy fortune-tellers.

“The rice ration is a month late,” my father said grimly, before instructing the driver to take the less-traveled streets and avoid the main road. He had an important meeting with someone from the occupation forces and he didn’t want to be late. There was business to conduct. Americans drank sake, too, though what they really liked was beer.