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MEIRA
CHAND

THE BONSAI TREE

Marshall Cavendish
Editions



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She was expected, Kate knew, to prove loyalty to her mother-in-law, satisfying her every wish. Such obedience here was virtue. If a wife and a mother both were drowning, explained a proverb, a son should save his mother; wives were two a penny ... In this modern age these attitudes withdrew to shadows, but a residue remained.

Liberal-minded Jun Nagai, heir to a prominent business empire, brings his beautiful and intelligent English wife Kate Scott back to Japan after a whirlwind romance – a marriage his complex, powerful and traditional mother Itsuko naturally disapproves.

While Jun is pulled between the two cultures, owing loyalty to both, Kate is thrown into an unfamiliar world where her role of a wife lies within strict social constructs. Stripped of all romantic illusions, she struggles to retain her individuality. A shattering encounter leads her directly to the gritty abject underbelly of Kamagasaki – dumping ground for the destitutes and untouchables, a section ruled by gangsters and plied by prostitutes, with no place in society.

First published in 1983, this is Meira Chand's unforgettable novel of the clash of Western and Japanese cultures, now in an updated edition for a new generation of readers.

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FICTION

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There were sounds now at last. Kate went to the window, peering out into the dark, at the lamp that glowed above the tall roofed entrance gate. It was opened by Itsuko's chauffeur and her mother-in-law appeared. In the sphere of light Kate could see each speck of snow on Itsuko's sculptured hair and the soft fox fur around her neck. She placed a hand on the join of kimono at her knee beneath her short silk coat. Jun came through the gate behind her and opened an umbrella above his mother. They hurried forward and were soon hidden by a wing of the house. There was the sound of the front door sliding open, their voices and Fumi's welcoming greeting. Earlier, Kate had seen Yoko arrive and her voice now joined Fumi's. Kate continued to stand at the window, on the same few inches of bare polished board where she spent so much of each day, staring out through the pane of clear glass inserted for her in the frosted window. It was six weeks since she arrived in Japan.

She should have gone down to greet them, as was expected, as she always did. Instead today she waited, but Jun did not come up to see her. He had left at five that morning for an early flight to Tokyo. Left before she even awoke and returned in the afternoon, going straight to the office in Osaka, and coming home only now with his mother. She listened for his foot on

the stairs, wanting some moments alone with him before the evening began. Today of all days. She lingered a few moments more, but there was no sound. At last she turned to the door, knowing she could delay no longer, that they would be waiting for her downstairs.

They were seated round the table when she entered the room, Jun, his mother Itsuko and the two aunts, Fumi and Yoko. Old Hirata-*san*, the maid, hurried in with hot *sake* jars on a tray. On the table two empty containers already awaited replenishment. There must always be alcohol when Yoko visited. It was suspected she consumed unhealthy amounts, for often on the phone to Itsuko in the evening, her voice was a gentle slur and inclined to weak emotion. She looked up with a smile at Kate and patted the cushion between herself and Jun. He nodded to Kate in a preoccupied way as she sat down awkwardly on the floor, a hand on her belly, for the child kicked suddenly inside her.

The meal was already laid on the low table, in many small delicate dishes. A meal of yellow-tail fish and crab, hot bean paste soup with needle mushrooms, steaming hot rice, pickles and a salad of roots and sesame seeds. The food and the language were still difficult for her, even after a year of marriage.

‘Oh,’ said Itsuko, kneeling primly, her eyes upon Kate across the table. ‘I thought you were out.’

‘Out?’ Kate puzzled, meeting her mother-in-law’s gaze.

‘You were not at the door to greet us. What else could I presume?’ Itsuko replied. ‘It is our custom you should be there, as you know. It is a matter of etiquette, a matter of manners. Were you not well?’

Kate hesitated, looking at her husband, willing him to speak.

'You know how tired she is, Mother. She's not yet used to our ways.' Jun defended her but Kate could not forget he had not come upstairs to find her, today of all days.

'Not used? She must *get* used. We have a position to maintain.' Itsuko was in her sourest mood. A problem at the office had upset her whole day.

'Gently, gently,' Yoko cautioned. 'She comes from another world. I know. I have travelled. There, I have seen a daughter-in-law waited upon by her mother-in-law.' She meant to help but her sister's face grew sharp as granite and Yoko was not displeased. In the past she too had often been victim of Itsuko's imperiousness. The *sake* swirled pleasantly in her.

'Oh what a pretty bracelet.' Yoko took Kate's wrist and examined an Indian bangle.

From where she knelt at the end of the table Fumi darted quick anxious looks, hating the strain between them all. She bustled suddenly beside the maid, making room upon the table for yet another small dish.

'Will you pour us some *sake*?' Itsuko demanded more kindly, holding out her tiny cup.

'Of course.' Kate rose clumsily to her knees, anxious to please. The small jar was hot in her hands, the cup beneath it seemed little bigger than a thimble. She steadied her fingers about it, but the liquor spilt over her hands and onto a plate of pickles.

'Oh,' said Itsuko. 'Careful, careful.' Vexation cracked her face. Could Kate do nothing right? She was all sincerity, all spontaneity. Itsuko thought of the girl she had picked to be Jun's wife, the daughter of a Diet member, an old and noble family. Tentatively, she had even made the first enquiries through a go-between, and found them well received. She thought of the face

of that young girl, passive and touching, a face of delicacy and reticence. What an asset such a girl would have been. How much she would have furthered Itsuko's innermost ambition. And in the house she would have known her duties, known her place. Instead, she had acquired Kate who moved about so clumsily in both the world of tables and emotions. She could not even keep the traditional slippers on her feet. Often, Itsuko heard in the corridor the skidding of a piece of footwear. Or upon the bare and upright stairs a falling thump, and the woman's low fierce words, 'Christ. Damn it.'

'Don't worry,' Yoko comforted, pulling her legs to the side beneath her, leaning an elbow on the table, chin upon her hand. 'I don't like that variety of pickle, the *sake* will improve it. We'll add more soy too.' Picking up the jug she dribbled a dark stream of sauce over the limp, green pickles.

She enjoyed baiting Itsuko, and felt guilty too for the severity with which Itsuko treated Kate. She herself had liked Kate immediately, and welcomed her into their family. Everybody she knew had commented immediately on Kate's quiet beauty. She had a slim, long-legged grace, and had no need for even the light make-up she wore, for her skin was fine. The sharp boning of her face set off the intelligence of her wide-set grey eyes. Long, thick red hair and a flair with clothes made most women envy her, and the men always clustered about her; but she appeared unaware of these qualities, and did not seem to notice the looks she drew.

If she had been a Japanese, thought Yoko, she would have allowed herself to feel jealous. Instead she stared at Kate in admiring curiosity, Her expression was never still, but reflected each feeling in a way quite alien to Yoko. It was fascinating to

watch her. She reminded Yoko of a French actress she had seen in a recent film. Yoko sighed enviously and smiled as she caught Kate's eye.

'You too, Yoko, are greatly lacking in your etiquette. It does not become you. And at your age,' Itsuko admonished. Yoko shrugged and added more soy sauce to the pickle. She did not care. She had long ago gone beyond all limits.

Why could Yoko not set a better example, Itsuko wondered. Look at her, leaning over the table, slurring her vowels, her expression lax and vulgar like a common bar girl. Yes. She must admit it. For this was the image that came to mind nowadays with Yoko. And she did not wish to think about it but she suspected there were lovers. However, she had long since washed her hands of Yoko, long since made it clear to the world that this younger sister was no part of the family honour. But it made Itsuko mad to see such delight with a foreign niece-in-law. No doubt Yoko liked the image. Curiosity, if not acceptance, was in her lazy eyes.

Itsuko gazed at Kate bitterly. In the old days a mother-in-law had a daughter-in-law on trial and sent her home if proved unsuitable. *Sent her home*. Or even later dissolved the marriage, perhaps overruling a son's objection. Even now some divorces were initiated not by a husband, but by his mother. But this was rare. For nowadays all was lost identity, all was interest in the foreign, a breaking with traditional ties, the old wine was in new bottles, the old concepts remodelled to modern trends. Just so had she acquired the daughter-in-law who now sat across the table. She could not forgive Jun. She should have married him off before he went to England.

The worst shock had been to see that Kate was already with child. It had been a surprise when she first saw Kate at

the airport, hanging onto Jun's arm, waving, smiling across the barriers. Itsuko had felt quite faint, she had not known Kate was pregnant. And when they came out, Kate had moved forward, smiling, pushing her cheek against Itsuko in embrace. Such a thing had never happened to her. She had been unprepared for the distress that swept through her powerfully. She had pulled away in a short, sharp jerk and a gasp of rattled breath. Jun bowed deeply in respect while saying something low to Kate, so that she drew back, her smile fading to a blush. Even now Itsuko shuddered to remember the moment of physical contact, such *gaucherie* and garrulity. These were the ways of foreign lands. These were ways she did not know and never would if she could help it.

But tonight they all annoyed her. *The woman*. She could think of her as nothing more, could not in her mind give her the endearment of a name. *She* who now competed for her son's affection, an affection Itsuko took as her own right; the small change, the only loving return from a long and solitary marriage. And that highly unrepentant son, fussing round his wife, weak-willed, directed by her, hurrying always to spread oil on troubled waters. Troubled waters. She would give him troubled waters. And Fumi, dowdy, befuddled, indistinguishable sometimes from the maid. And did Fumi think that Itsuko had not noticed those little smiles and whispered encouragements passed surreptitiously to Kate. God alone knew what sentimental waffling she imparted to Kate through their house-bound days, while Itsuko supported them, worked for them, navigated the world of industry from her office desk. And Yoko. And Yoko? What could be said of Yoko? What had it come to, their grand family name? These few tatters round this table? Only she, it

seemed, had inherited the iron vision that had always propelled her father and her grandfather.

Itsuko stared at the small blue chrysanthemum printed in the bottom of her empty cup. For the first time in her life she dare not look into the future, nor predict it as she always had. It was enough to drive her, like Yoko, to a bottle in the evening. Instead, she thrust out to Kate once more the thimble-sized *sake* cup.

Kate sat back when the round of small cups were refilled, trembling still, the heat stirring then pulsing through her. Suddenly the child began to turn, quickening in her like silver on a tooth, its heart moving against her own. So that she put a hand to her belly as if to hold it still. Across the table Itsuko's face was stripped and brutal in its bitterness. She was expected, Kate knew, to prove loyalty to her mother-in-law, satisfying her every wish. Such obedience here was virtue. If a wife and a mother both were drowning, explained a proverb, a son should save his mother; wives were two a penny. In the old days at a family meal a daughter-in-law must sit by the side of the hearth where the smoke blew in her eyes. In this modern age these attitudes withdrew to shadows, but a residue remained. These things she knew, she tried her best, but ignorance and sometimes pride cut rents into each day.

She had met Jun first at one of Paula's parties. When she arrived the room had been a crowd of strange faces to her. Paula's husband, Pete, was talking animatedly to an attentive Japanese, he waved and called her to him, introducing her immediately.

'Kate Scott, Jun Nagai. Kate is a friend of Paula's and works at the same interpreting agency. An accomplished lady, university

graduate, speaks Spanish, French and German.’ He gave her a congratulatory pat on the shoulder. ‘And Jun is from Japan, although we didn’t know him when we lived there. He came to me here to buy dyestuffs; he’s in England to study British textile methods. Jun’s from a very old family who owns spinning mills in Japan.’ Pete soon turned away, to talk to other guests.

The Baileys were American. Pete worked for a multi-national chemical company that trundled him around the world with his family, to spread the sale of detergents and paints. Paula, who had been a teacher of modern European languages before her marriage, was working while in London at the same interpreting agency where Kate was also employed. The Baileys were in their third year in London, after a five-year posting in Japan. They had loved Japan, Paula told Kate, and hoped to have another posting there.

Jun found a couple of empty seats and they sat down together. On a small table beside them stood a painted lacquer box. As a point of conversation Kate asked Jun its use, knowing it came from Japan. The Baileys’ were avid collectors. Japanese antiques and ornamental objects, bought on their previous posting to Japan, adorned their apartment. Retrieved from the dust of curio shops and flea markets, *tansu* chests, woodblock prints, chinaware and lacquerware were forced in the room to be mere decorations. A brazier became a plant stand, a candlestick a lamp, part of a painted sliding door hung framed upon a wall.

‘It’s a *kai-oki*, a box to store the shells used in an ancient game. Later the Portuguese introduced Western cards in the sixteenth century.’ He spoke slowly in good English, and she was struck by the quality of his voice.

‘Shells?’ she queried.

‘A species of clam; the shells were beautifully decorated and must be matched together. In some shells half a poem was written, and the other half in its mate. But it was all a long time ago, you know.’ He smiled at her rapt expression.

‘Modern Japan is another world.’ He got up to refill her glass and she watched him cross the room, aware of his interest in her. As he made his way back to her with fresh drinks, pushing his way determinedly between the groups of effervescent people, she observed the expression on his face as he concentrated on the glasses in his hands. He frowned as someone joggled his elbow, slopping drink onto his thumb. His purposeful passage through the room seemed out of place in the general frivolity and facetious conversations. He sat down again with an apologetic smile, wiping his wet hand with a handkerchief.

‘And what are all these pictures?’ she asked after he had settled, continuing their conversation, pointing to the Baileys’ collection of woodblock prints. Jun nodded, eager to explain.

‘Those of the big, fat men, are old portraits of sumo wrestlers. The others are all *Kabuki* actors.’

Kate listened, the alien words conjuring up an unknowable world, wise and esoteric. She felt already a little removed from the gusto of the room, and protective of Jun’s special sensibility before the gaucherie of the crowd. His expression held at all times a formality and reserve.

He was not a big man, slightly taller than her, but this did not distract from his masculinity, there was a suppleness about him that was almost feline. His skin was smooth, his hair thick and sleek; there was the scent of cigarettes and certainty about him. Even his thoughts, Kate felt, must not be haphazard like her own, but exact and polished, laid out in neat piles in his

head, for he produced them with an air of such certainty. 'You're an oriental enigma,' she later told him, laughing. But in the beginning it had been impossible to know what he might be thinking, until she learned to read him.

At the table Itsuko sipped her *sake*, and Kate took care not to meet her eyes. It seemed impossible now to think that only six weeks before these sisters about the table had been no more to Kate than names upon a sheet of letter paper. Now she called them family, and felt as a piece of soft fruit in their hands, to be bitten by them to the core.

It was difficult to reconcile the common blood that flowed between the sisters. Neither chalk nor cheese, nor night and day could adequately explain the differences between the elder two who lived together in the old family house, bereft of men. Both were widows, both bound within society to be no more than shadows of the dead. But Itsuko, had the boldness and the arrogance to step outside her circle. She continued to run her husband's business, silencing male dissent, and soon placed herself at the head of the family. Such audacity in a woman was unheard of; the headship of a family was the heritage of men. But Itsuko held shares and power, she was the eldest of three daughters in a family without a male heir. As was customary in such cases, her husband was adopted, to inherit the family business. It had been he who came like a bride to live in his in-laws' house. His own name was struck from his family register, and he took that of his wife. Itsuko had never respected these admissions of want and weakness. For what able, well-established man would accept such a loss of male prestige in return for prospective security? Of course,

although impoverished he was of desirable descent; he was not just anybody; the marriage had brought connections. In public Itsuko produced the deferences demanded, but in her own mind she felt superior to her husband.

She could never forget she was a Nagai, nor the feeling that her life, unlike other women's, was not to be tempered by circumspection. In a house of women she had never known the traditional subservience to brothers, never had to knuckle beneath a mother-in-law. Early in life she saw a path marked out for herself as if she were a body; these were strange thoughts in the head of a woman.

But she had still to wait for her husband's death. She seized that moment to succeed to the headship of the family until her son, Jun, came of age. Senior male relatives of branch families were powerless before the fact of shares and her will; they helped her for a while. Ambition was solid as her own flesh, before her directions took clear shapes and consolidated strength. She refused the passive place of widow and her allotment as a woman, she stepped in every way far beyond her role. She was shrewd and cunning, she had vision and charm and an essential business acumen. In the twenty years since her husband's death, she had moulded the Nagai Spinning Mills from a large into a prominent concern. Her name was known beyond spheres of work, for she was all but alone in Japan's industrial world as a powerful, active businesswoman. 'It is only,' she had said, 'until my son comes of age.' But the words did no more than wet her lips and dissolved again to the shapelessness that was then all the years ahead. Now Jun was thirty-one, impatient for his future.

There was much less to be said of Fumi. Accepting and effacing with hair as short and coarse as badger fur, she began

sometimes to knit a garment that had no destination, that might begin as a jumper and end as a scarf. Fumi, in widowhood, accepting and effacing, receded to her proper place, as a “cold rice relative”, at the beck and call of the family and mute to all decisions. She became her sister’s housekeeper and closed her eyes to that other life that had deprived her of a husband and at different times, two children. Her daughter had died in infancy, and her son had been killed in a motorcycle accident at the age of nineteen. The unrelenting destiny that left her so plain and homely refused to endow her life with more than a minimum of warmth. Her husband’s fortunes had dwindled quickly into debt and soon he took his life. These sorrows shattered her last assumptions and left her as she was. The past was mirrored in her untidy outline, compassion was solid in her face.

Yoko was the baby, twenty years her sister’s junior, born late in life to elderly parents. She saw her sisters’ marriages from her mother’s knee. Her eyes still held in their waywardness the results of early spoiling, and a certain exclusion through age from the centre of the family. She had always lived in a world of her own, believing the difference in years placed her in another era; she was a modern woman. Her independent spirit made it difficult to arrange the most suitable marriages. She offended, deliberately, any number of go-betweens, and when pressed to attend *miai* meetings with designated bachelors, spoke or acted commonly or afterwards found a birthmark, baggy trousers, or a tendency to drunkenness in her suitors that no one else had noticed. In spite of an exclusively feminine education, she found at sixteen an unlikely romance with the son of the gardener. This was soon smothered by the family in shame, and fear of leaks that might wreck her chances of a future marriage.

The family could never see it was the instinctive rebellion in Yoko that aborted each attempt to marry her.

When their parents died in a car crash, Itsuko continued the campaign to get Yoko married. At last she consented, with stubborn bad grace, to marry the son of an old business acquaintance, but almost at once she took a lover. Her husband divorced her immediately. All she did was heave a sigh of relief and refuse to feel the stigma. Such shame, such gossip, such wantonness was a slur upon the good name of her husband's family. Yoko did not care, she had a worldly new status, financial means, and was a woman of her time. She began to earn her own living, cashing in a small reserve of talent and numerous connections. She became first a designer in a fashion firm and then left to start her own boutique. Now she had a thriving business of her own, and lived by herself in a flat in Kobe. Itsuko disowned her, but time, the proverbial healer, mellowed the wound. There was talk upon the telephone, and sometimes now a visit. At forty, Yoko was beautiful still in her selfish, languid way, with wine-dyed hair and the fineness of Itsuko's skin and features in broader bones and jaw.

Once, thought Kate, looking across the table, her mother-in-law had been a passive bud, mild and charming, and submissive. Kate had seen old photographs that showed a face where dreams and gentle secrets were sewn up deep inside.

The child quickened in Kate once again, she held her breath and closed her eyes upon its strange, determined presence, turning in her like imprisoned vines. Perhaps this child would be the link across histories and mentalities, would change things in touching, innocent ways. She willed and prayed it, pushing tears away. She felt ill with natural causes.

Jun touched her gently. He survived each meal in silence, ignoring her before his mother. She felt mean to blame him for her difficulties. It was not his fault. He lay between his mother and herself like a frail, slat bridge across a chasm.

She remembered the Baileys' mixed response to the news of her engagement to Jun.

'We're so happy for you.' Paula had hugged her, but in the same breath expressed caution. 'It is not an easy society to marry into.'

'The Baileys don't think I should marry you.' She told Jun later.

'Kate. Believe me. Everything will be all right.' He took her hand, clasping it firmly. It was as if in a choppy sea, someone had thrown her a rope, and she grasped it gladly.

They married, and in one breathless year she saw her certainties fulfilled and her doubts dissolve. She made a beginning with the language, taking lessons at an institute and acquired a taste for the cuisine. She achieved a deft use of chopsticks and spoke of the meaning of inner space in Japanese art and architecture. In a luxury flat above Holland Park, with a view of lawns and chestnut trees and some swans upon a lake, she seemed with ease to possess Japan already in the palm of her hand. Nothing prepared her for the reality.

She looked up to find Fumi's eyes upon her and smiled. Aunt Fumi nodded, fussing with some stubborn wool caught about a button. Kind as always, she differed from her worldly sisters in character and also in looks, for as Itsuko had decided, she was indistinguishable from the maid. Her life had been drained of

happiness, yet there was no bitterness in her face. She smiled encouragingly to Kate.

Jun drank his soup, bowl to his face, his eyes safe within its circle. Kate wanted to turn to him, to remind him of today, for clearly, he had forgotten. She did not eat much, nervously mashing the thick wedge of fish with her chopsticks, picking small flakes from a bone. She had no appetite, yet dare not leave it, already she felt Itsuko marking the mess on her plate. The silence was broken only by the faint wheeze of the oil stove glowing within its corner, the slurp of soup and the knock of chopsticks on a bowl. They concentrated on the meal, Itsuko's will reflected on them all.

Kate moved uncomfortably on her cushion. She had been five months with the child when she arrived, and almost at once her own clumsy body seemed to turn against her and refused to manipulate the sitting and sleeping on floors, the deep baths, the narrow corridors and small rooms. And her own solidity terrified her, growing as she watched, unstoppable. She shifted heavily, moving an aching leg. She had never complained, managing to sit as required through each meal but day by day as her weight increased she new how clumsy she appeared, in a way she had never known before.

Jun put down his chopsticks. His mother's eyes stung like nettles in his face. He ignored her and turned to Kate.

'You can't sit like that. Wait. I know what to do.' He got up and left the room.

'Yes. Yes.' Fumi read his thoughts and hurried after him.

Itsuko continued with her soup in silence, the bowl before her face, her chopsticks guiding the stalks of mushrooms into her mouth, ignoring Kate. Soon Jun and Fumi returned with

the soft, yellow backrest from Fumi's room, and pushed it beneath Kate's cushion.

'Now stretch your legs out straight beneath the table. Better?' Jun asked. He pressed her shoulder, bending to her, although he knew her eyes sought out the love between them. Their return to Japan was much worse than he had feared it would be.

'That's better,' nodded Kate. But it was the closeness of his concern and hand as much as any backrest. It seemed less painful that he had forgotten today. Soon they would be alone; she would not allow her disappointment to weigh upon them. She placed a hand gratefully on Jun's knee beneath the table.

Itsuko's eyes narrowed. From the end of the table Fumi darted a harassed glance at her sister, and was at pains to refill the *sake* cups before Kate could be admonished. Yoko leaned on the table, refusing to be part of the moment. Her sister's predilections had nothing to do with her. She had long since washed her hands of Itsuko's affairs. Jun did not speak, sitting again like a statue, guilt and anger at his mother raging within him. He did not dare to look at Kate, the meal continued slowly.

'We must hurry,' Itsuko spoke suddenly, looking across at Jun. 'Don't forget, we have an appointment, they will be waiting for us.' Jun nodded silently and continued with his meal.

'Out? You're going out?' Kate asked dismayed.

'Yes, there are things to discuss with a tenant of my mother's.' He had told her nothing of his plans, not wanting to disappoint her. He was waiting for the outcome of this evening before he approached his mother.

Fumi's kindness was far away, unable to help, and the words burst out Kate.

'Do you have to? Do you have to go?'

‘Yes.’ He spoke sharply, in an effort to appease Itsuko. Kate did not understand this strategy, she could not see the more gentleness Itsuko sensed, the more distaste stirred within her. Kate’s eyes filled with tears, Jun looked away, hating himself.

‘Will you be long? Will you be late?’ Her voice was low and flat.

‘I don’t know, possibly. Don’t wait up. I have no idea when we might be back.’ He forced himself to say it with cruel detachment. Itsuko granted her approval with a small, firm nod. A tear trickled from Kate’s eyes.

‘What’s the matter now?’ he frowned. Afterwards he would explain why he had to do this.

‘I haven’t seen you today. You went out at five this morning. Today was our wedding anniversary.’

She had not meant to say it, but fatigue was a weight she could no longer carry. Now she had said it she knew it did not really matter, that it had little to do with her tears.

How could he have forgotten? Jun cursed himself and saw sudden light in Itsuko’s eyes. He could keep up the pretence no longer, and took Kate’s hand apologetically, Tears spilled down Kate’s face.

Itsuko looked on in disgust at such overt demonstrativeness. She did not glance in Kate’s direction but returned with dainty expertise to a last piece of ginger pickle. Jun took no notice of Kate’s tears, he stood up and left the room. Itsuko nodded her approval, laid her chopsticks on their rest, her rice bowl cleaned of each single grain, and followed him from the table. Soon there was the sound of the front door closing behind them.

Kate tried to sleep, but the waterfall disturbed her, rushing as always through each night, and through each day behind the

clack of the bamboo water-pipe in the garden. The contraption filled and emptied ingeniously, with a sharp noise that scared away birds. A January cold consumed the dark, polished surfaces of old wood in the large, bare room. A space that smelled astringently, of smooth rush mats, padded tight, of mothballs in a chest of drawers and the fumes of the small oil stove. She wished for a chair, but there were none. She was not yet used to a life on her knees, to the sudden drop of eye levels and the altering of perspectives. She heard Yoko depart, and later Fumi brought hot chocolate and biscuits as an offering of comfort. Kate lay in the bed of thick quilts spread upon the floor, and listened to the waterfall. Falling, falling without end, its sound spinning through the weeks behind, connecting for her the days, the week. And the mortar, that ornamental bamboo pipe, marking the passing of each moment.

At first she could not stand the mortar, like a loud, clacking clock in the garden, like a self-important mechanical duck, its bamboo throat filling with water, then clapping down empty spilling water upon the stones. Again and again. It did not disturb Jun, beside her he slept, she watched him most nights in the moonlight that speared a crack in the window shutters. Clack, clack.

Through the frozen nights, through the icicles that formed like daggers in the pond about the water plants. Through the frost that made of moss between small trees hard, bruised passages of ground. She had never been so cold. There seemed in the house a blatant disregard for the necessity of creature comforts. Or they simply did not feel it. Her mother-in-law was wrapped snugly into layer upon layer of winter kimono, bound at the midriff, tight and firm, and Aunt Fumi sagged untidily

beneath muddy-coloured woollens, thick stockings and thicker underwear. They sat mostly beside a few smouldering bits of charcoal in a green china brazier. Sometimes they lit the oil stove, but opened a chink in the window to dissipate the fumes. The cold was at her fingertips in the touch of frozen glass, the wood upon the bannisters, the dark corners in the upper storey of the house. Hirata-*san*, the ancient maid, survivor of another era, gold-toothed and spry as morning light, delighted in a pocket warmer and electric slippers plugged in at the sink. Green lichen on stone lanterns froze, cold tiles near the bath tub made her feet ache. The blooms on a bush of white camellia, small and pinched, soon died and faded to the colour of brown paper. Pipes burst. A frozen kitten was found dead at the gate. Then there was snow, its white light illuminating the secrets of the house and its fossilised interiors. She cried with the frugality, discomfort and cold.

‘So soon?’ Jun had said. ‘Just because of a little cold?’ And from an iron-bound chest pulled out two padded men’s kimono, slipped them one inside the other and held it open for her. It barely met across her distended belly. She looked down forlornly as he laughed, turning her around and around, winding the thin silk *obi* low beneath her stomach as if she were a man.

‘This is the coldest part of the winter. We call it *daikan*.’ And he had shown her a photograph in the newspaper of half-naked kindergarten children exercising in the snow. ‘We breed hardiness early. We learn to live with nature, we do not kick against it. We don’t cosset ourselves with central heating, electric blankets and the like,’ he had laughed.

‘Why not? Why not? Why suffer like this?’

‘We do not feel it as you do. You too will learn,’ he promised.

Even her thoughts had frozen.

But the next day he came home with an electric blanket, with thick, sock slippers and a mohair shawl. Then she had felt better, the bed was warm. She was a hibernating thing in a secret nest unsavaged by the season. She resisted when they came to roll the quilts away, to face her again with bare floors. She begged she was unwell, that she needed to rest through the day.

‘It is not customary,’ said Itsuko when she heard, tight-lipped, ‘for quilts to be left like that all day. It is a sign of slovenliness. They must be folded and stored, the table and cushions must be laid out instead.’

But Kate had clung to her bed, swaddled and warm, her brittle emotions thawing, taking on once more vital form. She feigned exhaustion, which was not untrue. But after two days Fumi swirled in again with the maid, opening windows, whipping up quilts, spilling them out upon the thick tiled roof to air. The room was filled by a frozen gust, and the precious yellow rectangle of her electric blanket was shaken free of the bed. Fumi laughed and laughed, soft and kind, and soon brought an extra oil stove, dusty still with cobwebs, from a forgotten cubby-hole.

Unable to sleep, Kate got up again and went to the window, to watch for Jun’s return. A single clear pane of glass had been fitted into the frosted window, for she had found it unbearable, not to see out. She spent a great part of each day in the room, and the opaque window threw her in upon herself, cutting her off from the world outside, refusing to reveal sharp mornings or the passage of the day upon the sun. To observe these things she must open the window and meet an Arctic blast. It became a point of desperation that she herself did not understand. If she

could see the sky, the road, the tops of trees, something in her might be eased.

‘But it is precisely because you should *not* see the road, and not be *seen* from it. It is for privacy,’ Itsuko explained stiffly, unable to understand such a blatant need to display oneself to the curiosity of the world. She was adamant on the matter, but gave way at last to Jun’s persuasion. Kate stood before the window now in the dark, staring out, waiting for Jun to return. The waterfall rushed on behind her thoughts.

A few flakes of snow drifted down, then quickened in a sudden flurry and stopped again. In the distance she could see the lights of the town and beyond it the bay, its vast black waste of water illuminated by the moon that rose above the small stout trees of the garden. The branches of an old loquat tree clawed against the glass in a breeze, and the bamboo mortar continued to knock unceasingly on the stones beside the pond, almost hidden by a dwarfed and ancient fir. There was nothing to be seen of the waterfall. It lay at the back, beyond the compound of the house, fed by springs and streams spilling down from the pine covered hills that backed the town of Kobe.

Nothing was anything like Kate had imagined.