

### No Place for Soft Men

The company sword was heavy in my hands. Matsumoto lay before me, his arm positioned along the middle of a thick branch. I raised the sword and took a deep breath. The air was heavy and damp.

I brought the sword down with all my might. It hissed as it sliced through the oppressive, humid, cursed air of Singapore, so different from the cool, scented air of my village.

The pain exploded in my shoulder before the crack echoed through the plantation. There was a pattern in the mud splotches on my boots. My eyes drifted to Matsumoto's wrist. There was a gaping cut and white flesh peeked out from it. There was no blood. I had not been able to cut through the bone.

One of the men screamed. I followed his gaze. Matsumoto's eyes had flipped open. They showed no reproach. I knelt by my dead friend's side and closed his eyes. In death, as in life, he was patient. "Forgive me," I said.

Oichi, the platoon leader, stood watching. I thought about what to do. Perhaps a little lower down the wrist? I closed my eyes and steadied myself. I stretched to raise the

sword high. I rocked back and then brought it down. This time, there was less pain from the impact.

The man standing on the other side, in front of me, lowered his eyes. I knew I had failed again. Now there were two gashes in Matsumoto's arm. "I will buy you many drinks in heaven, my friend," I said.

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It was hate at first sight. Matsumoto's eyes were distant and scornful, the eyes of a city boy who read books. We met at the Junior Course School in Asaka. I counted a thousand slaps in my first ninety days of training in the Imperial Guards. On nights when the ache in my cheeks became unbearable, I liked thinking how much harder it must be for Matsumoto, who got twice the slaps I did.

I fell in love with him on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February in 1941, before I fell in love with his sister.

It was Kigensetsu and we were at Joe's in Shanghai. Arai, the guy on my right, was a village boy with bulging biceps. He was more my type than Matsumoto, who had landed up on my left.

Arai was beside himself at the sight of a dozen undressed girls. He had, as usual, been drinking the fastest of all of us. "Look at that!" He shouted into my ear. "Just look!"

"What do you think I'm doing, asshole?" I said.

"You know," he said, squeezing my shoulder, "this place. Shanghai! There's no better place to be alive. There's a ripeness in the air that seeps into the bodies of women."

I gave him a smack on the back of his head. "Shut up and let me look."

His eyes were glazing. He would pass out soon. He said, “On— Onichi, you know, I’ve made love to Russians with breasts the size of my head, Japanese who don’t raise their legs, Indians whose energy is okay but their bones fucking hurt me.” He took a swig. “You know who’s the best?”

“Russians?” I said.

“No! Chinese! The best of them all! Supple bodies, and shaved...” He brought two fingers together in the shape of a vagina.

I have to admit that until Keiko planted the seeds of doubt in my mind, those shows with their abundance of women were the happiest moments of my life.

“Hey! Will you marry me?” Arai shouted. He was on his feet. His Chinese was no better than mine. We knew just enough. He was pointing at one of the women on stage. The music had paused for a second as the women curtsied. The whole hall burst into shouts, laughter, and ripostes. The dancer he had pointed to did an elaborate act of being overwhelmed. There was more thumping of tables and whistling.

Matsumoto had been his quiet self all the time. I prodded him in the side. “So, Matsumoto? Nothing like a bald pussy, right? So pure!”

He gulped and opened his mouth. I could not hear him. It was his blush that told me that had never enjoyed a woman. At the age of twenty, when we were prepared for our highest purpose — to die for the Emperor — Matsumoto had not seen the meaning of life.

“Did you not love it?” I asked him when we were back at the barracks. We had hauled Arai into his bunk, left him snoring and stepped outside to finish the night with a last smoke in the cold air. We stamped on the ground to keep ourselves warm.

He looked at me and then his eyes darted beyond me. I realised then that what I had taken for arrogance was actually painful shyness.

His eyes lit up as he exhaled a thick cloud of smoke. He kept the cigarette instead of giving it to me. “Well, it was my first time,” he said. “When I finished, I thought I was...”

“In heaven?” I said.

“Yes! But right after, I wished I had saved myself for a woman I loved.”

I snorted. “That’s why they say books make you less manly.”

He looked into my eyes and held my gaze. I had pricked him.

I poked him and beckoned with my finger for the Kinshi cigarette. Its fragrant plume had turned thicker. He handed it over with an apology. I pulled hard on it. Its end glowed. When I let out a thick cloud of smoke, my head whirled with happiness. I had climaxed twice, and the girl had planted a kiss on my cheek when I paid her. I had drunk like an animal, and I had held it. And I had a new friend in Matsumoto. The cigarette smoke got into my eye, making it water, but I did not mind that.

Matsumoto spoke then for a long time. My mind reeled. He talked about the time when the police came to his house and confiscated his books. The despair at having to pull out of university. “There is nothing worse than this fucking army of morons. It is built on a pack of lies!” he said.

The cigarette singed my fingers. I pinched it between my middle finger and thumb and flicked it far away. Its embers reminded me of the glow worms back in my village. I took a deep breath. The cold night air, still laced with tobacco, made me giddy.

I looked around. There was no one else. I pressed his shoulder. “Listen to me, Matsumoto!” His eyes widened. The fog in my mind had cleared in an instant. Now I wanted to hit my bunk right away. “Listen,” I repeated. “Do not, ever, say that again. Never again. Not to me. Not to anyone. Clear?”

He lowered his eyes. “Thanks, Onichi,” he said.

We were both quiet. I ached for another cigarette, but we were out of them. I exhaled towards the half-moon and made smoke with my breath in the cold air.

“Tell me, Onichi, do you really believe all this? About Jimmu, about the world under our roof? And the way they behave, like fucking animals?”

“You’ve been idiotised by reading, Matsumoto,” I said. “I do what I am told to. And then, I do what I like.” I made a circle with two fingers of my left hand, and in and out motions with the index of my right. I spoke with the wisdom of a twenty-year-old who had been sent to do his duty towards the Emperor.

Matsumoto’s eyes flared. Then he shook his head, and exhaled long and hard through his mouth, as if he was breathing out toxic thoughts.

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I learned much later that Keiko was his sister. We only met together once, the three of us, and it was awkward. I had met Keiko at the Shanghai Shrine one spring afternoon when the flowers were blooming. She did not rebuff me when I strode up to her, full of purpose, and greeted her with respect. We met often in the coffee houses and cinemas. The White Horse Inn and Xinguang, of course, but many others as well.

Brother and sister showed me different sides of life. Keiko scolded me for learning Chinese only to buy girls. There was something in the way she did that – a faint reddening of cheeks, an iciness in her eyes, a warmth in her heart – that aroused me. In my mind, I undressed her and feasted on the points of her small breasts. She knew what I was up to. With an exasperated flicker, she slapped away my fantasies. She left me craving for more time with her. I thought of taking her to Joe’s. I would have the most beautiful girl by my side. I never did. We never went beyond holding hands.

The last time we met, she wore a light blue kimono. She brought me a box of Sakuma candies. I knew she had given one to Matsumoto as well. Those were the last Sakuma boxes we would see.

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In Malaya, the sun scraped our necks and foreheads, as it had all through our southward campaign. This was supposed to be winter, but the heat was fierce. We were cycling down a road that cut through endless, neatly arranged rubber trees. Jitra, where our advance troops saw heavy action, was still far away.

I stood up on both pedals and stretched my back in an arc, turning my head up towards the sky. I enjoyed the sight of the sky framed by the jagged canopy of branches and leaves flitting by. My backbone purred in gratitude.

“Onichi!” Matsumoto cried out. “Motherfucker! Watch out!” Another man shouted something I could not make out. I brought my butt back to the hard seat and braked in time to avoid entangling with the guy in front.

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On 8<sup>th</sup> December 1941, we cowered, shivering in the warmth, in an overloaded launch. The placid water of Johor strait barely rocked us. Our launch had slowed and was headed straight towards the tree, barely visible in the pitch dark, that was our target, our first step on the soil of Singapore.

The trees and the shore ahead became a brilliant red. The sky was streaked with a thousand flares. A column of water rose to our left. I wondered if I had become deaf. The explosion that followed was, in fact, deafening. Time had slowed down.

We were on our knees. There was a chaotic rattling as the British machine guns opened fire on us. The shoreline heaved to our right. It was the launch steering hard left

to avoid the enemy fire. A couple of hundred metres to our left, there was a loud bang. It was a direct hit on a launch. "Save me this night, Jimmu," I prayed. "I am too young."

The saltiness of the sea gave way to a familiar but odd smell. It was the smell of oil, a heady, pleasant, vaporous smell. Before I could think where all the oil came from, the night was on fire.

Some of the soldiers who had been wading through the waters ahead of our launch became blurred, writhing shapes. Fires danced over the water and on the trees.

Our launch lurched and shuddered to a halt. When the engines were cut, I heard strange sounds behind me. I turned to see that two men had been hit. One was jerking back and forth in pain. His shoulder was dark with blood. The other was screaming as he lay still. The medic squatted beside him.

Oichi's lips moved and he pointed to a clump of trees that had ghostly roots jutting out of the ground and towards the skies. Clouds of fire bloomed on both sides of that group of trees, but there was a clear path through to them.

I have no memory of what happened between then and the time I was holding on to one of the roots. I do not know if five minutes or an hour had elapsed in between. I saw more men moving in on my right. To my left there was one vast inferno. I moved towards the men.

"What company is this?" I shouted. No one answered. They were all strangers, coated in oil and mud, silhouettes without features.

A dark figure came running through towards me. The man was coated black with oil. Only the whites of his eyes glistened in the pale glow of fire, flares and stars.

"Onichi, it's me, Matsumoto!" He said.

The fire turned brighter. The heat was like a blanket that would suffocate me.

"Matsumoto!" I cried. "It's a relief —" A shell exploded far to our left.

“Onichi, you asshole, get a move on. Better to face the guns than to fry here,”

Matsumoto said. He was panting and his teeth chattered as if he was cold.

“Let’s go,” I said.

“Onichi, one thing —”

“Move on!” A group of men stumbled towards us. One of them was shouting.

“Go on, don’t burn to death here!”

Many of us had reached that conclusion. We charged towards a squat building on top of an embankment. During our briefing we had been told that it was a storehouse.

There were many charred bodies on the way to the building. When we got to it, it was a relief to find the shutters open and to hear the chaotic hubbub of Japanese voices from inside. From deeper inland, we heard the rumbling of engines. They must have been in the hundreds. The British were retreating from the front.

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It was late afternoon. We had ensconced ourselves on a 150-metre-high position that gave us a clear view of flat low land for about a kilometre. The land was covered by sugarcane fields and vegetable plantations. The company had finished moving in and we were resting.

“Enemy ahead!” A sentry cried.

“Hold your fire. Let them all come on to the vegetable field,” Company Commander Nemoto shouted. The enemy were still far away, strolling into our field of vision without a care. They wore brown shirts and shorts and flat tin helmets. Nemoto had ordered two heavy machine guns to be placed at the highest point. I lay on my belly next to one of them. I unclipped my safety catch. I locked the rifle on to one of the enemy. I could see him looking over his shoulder at his comrade, laughing. I resisted the



temptation to pull the trigger. I felt breathless. The air was still and humid. The shrill songs of the insects seemed to become louder.

“Fire!” Nemoto screamed as the front man of the enemy reached a stone’s throw away from us. I squeezed the trigger, and sure enough, the man I had in sight collapsed. The heavy machine guns drowned out the pops of our rifles as they cut dozens of Australians down.

That was when Matsumoto cried, “Aah, I’m hit! Oh god! Onichi –”

A medic came rushing to Matsumoto. He was the only one hit. The medic looked at me and shrugged. “He is dead,” he said.

I knelt by my dead friend’s side. The medic said, “The bullet came from behind.” It had been fired from the heavy machine gun and ricocheted off a branch straight into Matsumoto’s neck. I could only lower my head and nod numbly. As the medic closed my friend’s eyes and laid him flat on the ground, the blood was still seeping from his left side, mixing with the red earth.

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All these memories flitted by in my mind as I stood panting in the forest with the sword in my hand. Matsumoto’s life, like anyone else’s, was like a sugoroku, full of ups and downs, except that there was a throw of the die that could stub you out when the game had just begun.

“Strength, motherfucker! Put some strength into it!” Oichi barked. “Do it in one hard blow!”

A breeze rustled through the trees and gently fanned me. It cooled my armpits and my back. The blue shirt I had taken from the farmer and rubbed with mud was damp with sweat. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two yellow birds flit away. I took a few deep breaths. Over the mixed smell of damp red earth and forest, a delicate layer of a

flower's scent wafted through. I prayed to Jimmu to spare my friend from more pain. It struck me that I should aim even lower. I focused on the spot between my eyes till I felt it tingle. I raised and felled the sword in a clean and smooth move. There was a loud crunch. Matsumoto's hand fell onto the grassy earth.

I stayed bent for a while before straightening my back. My head swam as I looked Oichi in the eye. He nodded. Matsumoto lay at peace now. I picked up the severed hand. I had kept his mess tin next to me with its lid open. I put the hand into it and fastened it. I gripped the tin tightly, to stop my hands from shaking.

Matsumoto had carried his mess tin from Hiroshima to Shanghai, to Kysuhu and all the way through Malaya. Now it would carry a small part of him, the ashes of his hand, back to his family. The empire took his life and it would give his family those ashes, because it made no sense to carry his whole body to Japan. Keiko would tremble, as I was trembling now, when she saw the mess tin.

My own mess tin lay snug in my backpack, six feet away.

### **Acknowledgement and glossary**

This story draws very heavily on Henry P. Frei's *Guns of February: Ordinary Japanese Soldiers' Views of the Malayan Campaign and the Fall of Singapore, 1941-42*

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Kigensetsu – the day of ascension to the throne of the mythical Emperor Jimmu

Sugoroku – a traditional game, close to snakes and ladders